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What is indigenous psychology?

The example of Nepal



Picture 1: Jhankris are performing rituals

Introduction

What does traditional healing mean for Nepali people?

THE SOCIO-GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Nepal is a country rich in cultural and biological diversity, the total number of Indigenous Peoples in Nepal is 9,267,870, accounting for 35.6 percent of the overall population. With over 92 mother tongues spoken, altogether composed of 125 castes/ethnic groups and 123 languages, a fact that can be explained through Nepal's intertwined nature between the borders of the Indian subcontinent and Tibet. (National Census, 2011).

The Nepalese government recognized 59 Indigenous communities in 2002. The majority of Nepal's Indigenous Peoples still rely on forests for their livelihoods and have a symbiotic relationship with the forest and natural resources, sustainable forest and biodiversity management is critical for preserving their distinct identity and customary practices, as well as their ability to pass them down to future generations.

It is the cultural system of shared ideas, concepts, rules and meanings that underlie and are expressed in the ways that humans live.

It is learnt, transmissive, continuous, cumulative, dynamic and adaptive. Traditional health care system is also part of the cultural system because it has a cultural origin and cultural meaning acceptable and meaningful for that particular cultural group.

Traditional healing system is primarily a way of perceiving, conceptualizing, categorizing experience and interacting with others through common socially and culturally shared symbols and meanings. So, the socio-cultural environment is the source of the subjective world of the human being. This subjective world is altered through the process of seizing meanings and resources, and using them (Shweder, 1991).

Examples of indigenous psychology concepts?

---------- TRADITIONAL HEALING

In the context of Nepali culture, the expression "traditional healing" may include several methods that are applied by experts to cure the patients.

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- janne/dhami/jhankri, traditional tantric shamanic healers
- vaidya/jyotishi/ayurvedic astrologists
- local priest-experts
- simple users of herbs and powders.



Picture 2: An old mother selling herbs



Picture 3: Jaisi (astrologer) is performing puja to a sick baby

What does the literature say about nepali traditional healing?

How does it work?

Review of Literature reported a wide variety of traditional healing practices in Nepal. The majority of the reviewed literature used local terms (emic) when referring to distinct ethnic and cultural types of traditional healers.

These included but were not limited to:
- *dhami* (mediums or villagers like any other who indirectly heal through divine possession states; conventionally used in Western Nepal),
- *jhankri* (non-mediums who directly heal through their own powers with or without divine possession states; conventionally used in Eastern Nepal)
- *dhami-jhankri* (an unconventional though common amalgam of *dhami* and *jhankri*),
- *lama* (a Buddhist term for monk ritual practitioner which also refers to an informal traditional healer),
- *mata* (female healer, often referred to a woman who had become possessed by a spirit that in turn gave her healing powers),
- *ban jhankri* (jungle healer),
- *jyotishi* (astrologers who can heal patients),
- *mopa* (diviners),
- *ngags* pa (tantric priests),
- *baul* (mystic minstrels),
- *amchi* (Tibetan doctors),
- *bijuwa* (Rai traditional healer),
- *bombo* (*Tamang* or *Yolmo* healer),
- *lambu* (*Tamang* healer),
- *phombo* (*Jirel* traditional healer),
- *pande* (*Chepang* healer),
- *puimbo* (*Sunuwar* healer),
- *ngiarni* (*Sunuwar* healer),
- *poju* (*Gurung* healer),
- *hlewri* (*Gurung* healer),
- *gurau* (*Tharu* traditional healer),
- and *yeba* (*Limbu* traditional healer).

Others referred to less conventional healers such as a *punjari* (priests who specialize in puja rituals either at home or at the temple, typically Hindu) (TV Pham and et.al, 2021).
Generally, they are known as Traditional healers in native terms.

Similarly, they are called "*faith healer*," "*traditional faith healer*," "*traditional medical practitioner*," "*shaman*," and "*medium*" in the broad native language.

Tantra is supremely enlightening, revealing, and empowering to body, mind, and soul. For untold ages, people have been using it to heal themselves and to heal their families and societies. However, mantra and tantra faced certain limitations. For example, while traditional healers insisted that they could control all major spirits using mantra and tantra, they could not control spirits that caused madness (Sidky, 2008).

Practical example

How do traditional healers work?

---------- IDENTIFYING THE DISEASE AND ITS CAUSE

Traditional healers could divine the cause of illness by taking the patient's pulse, although with a less consistent approach when compared to the biomedical model (Van Leeuwen, 2008). If no pulse was in the right wrist, then no major deities could be said to be the cause. If there was no pulse in the left wrist, then an evil spirit or witch, was thought to be at work. If there was a pulse on both wrists, then the cause was deemed natural (Maskarinec, 1995).
Traditional healers could diagnose between magico-religious and physical causes of illness using specific acts of divination. One common technique was known as *jokana*, of which there were several similar varieties. During the process of *jokana* the traditional healer would take a few pieces of rice from a small pile on a plate, name a general magico-religious category of illness, and then determine the stated category's presence based on the pattern of rice as the traditional healer separated them. (Reinhard, 1976).
Traditional healers, both well- or ill-intentioned, delivered mantra (spoken prayer, hymns, or chanting) or tantra (bodies of text or schools of thought or sometimes a meaningless term spoken with mantra) to either heal clients or harm others (Soubrouillard, 1995).
For example, mantra and tantra could raise the saya (soul) in people whose saya has fallen, correct the ancestor-person relationship, treat ambiguous and confusing physical and psychosocial distress, or help a family overcome grief over a child's unexpected death (Subba, 2007).



Picture 4: Toward of lagu (ancestor shadow) with sacred water and duvo (Daphne Bholua)

Through symbolic narration, the individual eventually depersonalizes, defuses, reinterprets, and unburdens unfortunate, baffling, and frightening events while reintegrating their mental distress within a particularization of a more meaningful mythic world (Sidky, 2010). This creates a satisfying explanation that is internally consistent with traditional Nepali beliefs and meets the underlying security and existential needs within the patient, curer, and community (Craig, 2010).

Several healer-specific factors could impact quality of care. For instance, whereas community members viewed clinicians as “fish from another pond,” they viewed healers as neighbors who knew the local experience, whether familial or socioeconomic.

Traditional healing practices, as a health care service, have existed for thousands of years. Before the introduction of the modern health care system in the 1950s, traditional healing was the major health care system in Nepal. The traditional healer’s familiar role in Nepali society allows them to embody psychological attributes, expand their capacity for empathy, and express more sensitivity to their patient’s needs (Hitchcock and Jones, 1976). When compared to medical providers, traditional healers appear more familiar, less frightening, and less intrusive (Maskarinec, 1995).

The traditional healer’s ability to raise expectations stems from how they are viewed by the Nepali society. When strictly viewed within the scientific plane, researchers may overlook the traditional healer’s culturally perceived role as the guardian of an individual’s psychic equilibrium and the active mediator between the human and spiritual realms (Nicoletti, 2006; Sidky, 2008).

In fact, the traditional healer, through their spiritual role, can create religious explanatory frameworks to treat an individual’s psychological and sociological existential crises (Macdonald, 1976; Craig, 2010).

And it is within this psychosociological foundation that the traditional healer manipulates unconscious symbols of the body and self as a kind of culturally relevant psychotherapy.

Local theory underpins to make sense of illness that is much more meaningful to the locals than the term used and explanation provided by biomedical health practitioners.

Indigenous knowledge on health and illness is the product of the society and the genius of the people. The process of making sense of illness depends on logical explanation among symptoms, worldview held by the people and the nature and onset of the problem.

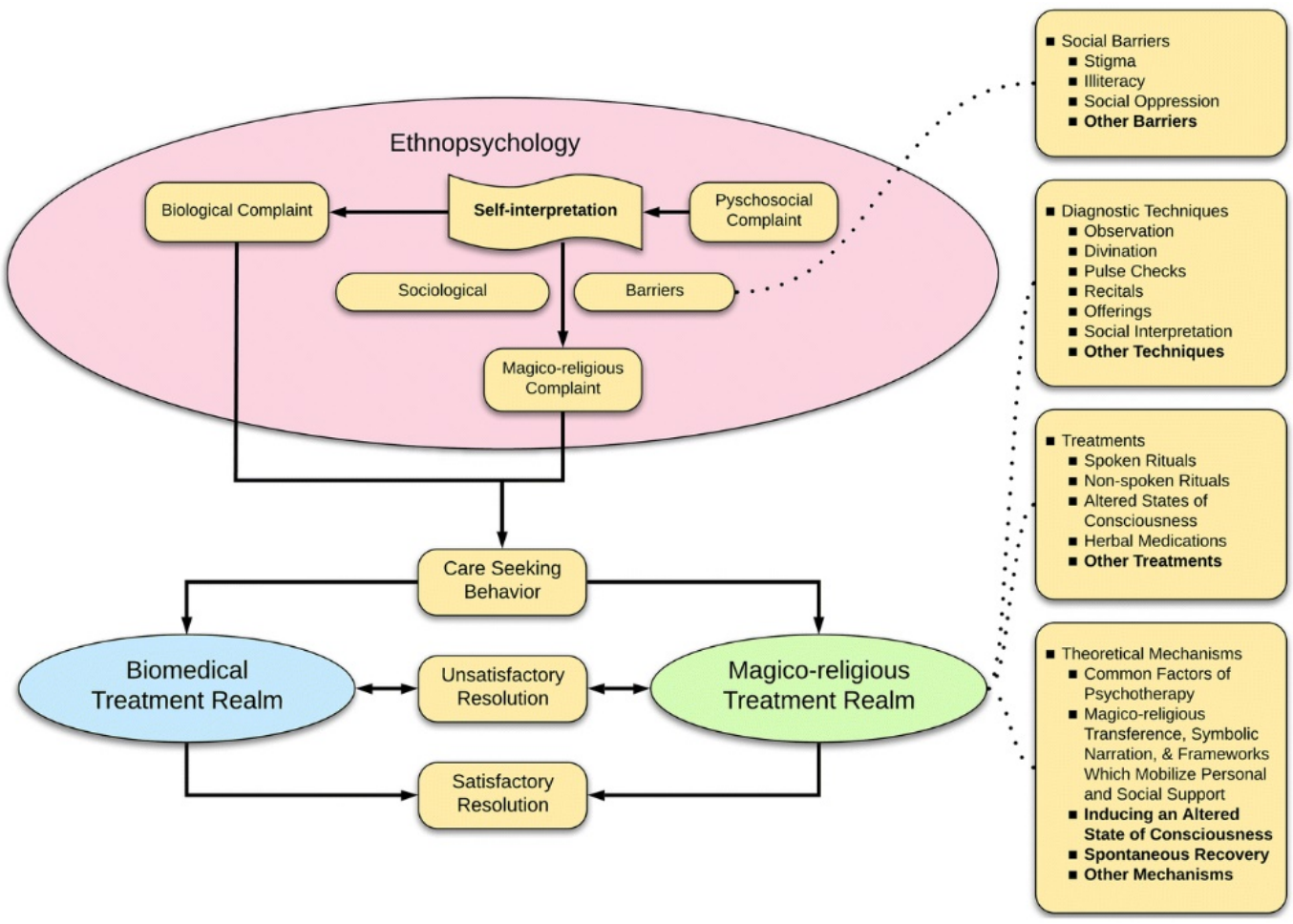
When one feels that something is not right physically or mentally, one tries to find out the answer to the "why" of the illness as well as to the "how" of the illness.

Socialization processes make a larger contribution in seizing the meaning, interpretation, and understanding of the illness.

The meaning of phenomenon does not lie outside rather it is within the cognitive whole that is developed, shaped and maintained by the social and cultural world. Making sense of the illness, thus, is the function of how one perceives the world around them and the meaning they attach to different phenomena.

The cultural logic that one applies fits appropriately since it is consistent with their cognitive organization. It largely applies to the people living in rural settings in which they often locate the meaning of an illness within their natural, social and supernatural world. Many times, the symptoms also have cultural significance that is shaped by social norms and expectations of the cultural groups.

Patients’ pathways to care in relation to Nepali traditional healers



Ethnopsychology model is adopting a mechanism of action approach to breaking down a specific psychosocial intervention into its specific and non-specific ingredients/processes (Alavi and Sanderson, 2015).

Access to Care: The origins of Nepali mental distress may fall under biological, psychological, sociological, and/or spiritual categories, patients may interpret their mental distress as a less stigmatized biological or magico-religious complaint. Patients will then present either to the biomedical treatment realm (e.g. doctors), the magico-religious treatment realm (e.g. traditional healers), or both depending on the context of their environment and illness.

Interventions: Magico-religious diagnostic techniques include divination, pulse checks, recitals, offerings, and social interpretation. Relationships may exist between a patient’s specific care seeking behavior and the traditional healer’s chosen intervention.

Theoretical Mechanisms of Healing: Traditional healers elicit subjective improvement spiritually through symbolic narration, psychologically through personal support, and socially through mobilizing family and community. They can also induce an altered state of consciousness or more simply facilitate spontaneous recovery.
Resolution of suffering: A patient may perceive a satisfactory resolution of suffering after their first visit to either the medical provider or the traditional healer. On the other hand, a patient may perceive an unsatisfactory resolution if they receive an intervention that lacks the biomedical or magico-religious background which they inherently desire.

Some clarifications on indigenous psychology?

Mental illness is often explained as the consequence of incurring the wrath of gods and goddesses, unfavorable planetary effects, evil spirits, sorcery, witchcraft and evil eye, breach of taboo and bad luck. Rituals are often undertaken to propitiate the evil spirits. Rituals vary depending upon the nature of spirit that has possessed the patient. In the community, it is believed that illness is caused even by astrological obstruction. Astrological belief holds that a person's life events are shaped by the position of the planets during the time of birth. Later the different position of the planets influences the body and the mind.

Indigenous psychology is a scientific study of human behavior (or the mind) that is native, that is not transported from other regions, and that is designed for its people

(Kim & Berry, 1993).

Sinha (1986) viewed that knowledge is generated and flourishes in a socio-cultural matrix. Indigenous psychology is the psychology from within the matrix of the native culture, based on their history, language, arts and common experience. Native people and their culture are the sources of knowledge. It is not the cultural narcissism at a local level but a part of a larger scientific psychology.

It emphasizes that socio-cultural context and history is the source of knowledge and attempts to find and explain both culture-specific knowledge and culturally shared knowledge by documenting, organizing, and interpreting the understanding, people have about themselves and their world. It emphasizes the use of natural taxonomies as units of analysis and examines how individuals and groups interact within their sociocultural context. This information is then used as a tool for discovering psychological invariants. Indigenous psychology is best suitable to find out native point of view in particular socio-cultural context and examine how such point of view is constructed.

Useful tips



1. Traditional healing practice is holistic and aims at the person's overall well-being. It takes the body, self, and society within a framework of dynamic equilibrium. The holistic approach takes into consideration the values, passions, beliefs, social interactions, and spiritual orientation of a person.



2. Traditional healing teaches us to live in balance in order to prevent illness. Psychological and spiritual wellness are involved in living in balance.



3. It involves the medicinal use of plants to treat illness and improve overall health and well-being. Traditional medicine has proven to be quite effective in treating both chronic diseases and psychological problems, especially those associated with stress, which frequently stem from social alienation, anxiety or loss of self-esteem.



Picture 6: Ban Jhankri in the trance state beating drums.

Clinical case example

----- THE DHAMI TREATMENT

The *dhami* treatment is more psychotherapeutic in nature. The healing process is achieved through agreement and compromise between the local gods and ordinary villagers, the *dhami* works as a mediator (Maskarinec, 1986). This process also includes five wise people called *panch* as counselors for both parties.

Mental illness is mostly interpreted as *bhagya ko kharabi* (ill fate) or *purva janam ko phal* (curse of the past life-loosely translated). Bipolar affective disorder is designated as *Ausi* (new moon) and *Purne* (full moon) *lagnu*. *Dhami* powers help people put aside the curses of the afflicted, solve the problems and reduce the misfortunes. *Dhamis* consoles and counsels the villages in cases of affliction and illness. Many *dhamis* also practice herbal medicine and *mantras*.

One of the traditional healers stated: *"The doctor can treat the roga but not the dokh. We can identify the spirit and solve the dokh problems. People usually come to us even after consulting the doctor".*

One of the implications of the healers' popularity in showing *dokh* problems is probably the psychotherapeutic value of the healing treatment.
Jhangri healing process is found to be similar with that of psychotherapy (Peters, 1998). One of the major criteria that are culturally recognized, to become a *dhami* is the power to reach the state of trance, usually, in early childhood, a potential *dhami* trembles uncontrollably. If trembling continues and the child or grown-up speaks about being possessed, s/he reveals the specific god by whom s/he is possessed.
A *dhami* treatment chiefly consists of the explanation of the cause of the affliction and ends with assurance to ward off the affliction within weeks or months. Most of the *dhamis* need a shrine or *thalo* (definite place to sit) to fall into trance.

Then s/he provides her/his services on certain days of a week. *Dhami* treatment in a *thalo* starts after brief rituals, like offering rice and fire (light) to the god, and then the *dhami* calls the god.

After a short time, if the call is heard, the *dhami* starts trembling as an indication that the god/spirit has started to possess them. Then s/he sits on the *gadi*, the sacred place with the help of rice, *dhwaja* (white and red ribbons) and other objects (needed for ritual) offered by the client, then s/he starts talking about the client. The *dhami* usually begins with a description of the client and his/her family as being good and helping relatives, having abundant fertile land, a good number of domestic animals and so on. After building up a positive picture of the client, the *dhami* starts talking about the problem, its source and the client's suffering.

During this period, the client and his/her family start communicating with the god through the *dhami.* Sometimes, the client does not agree with the source indicated or identified by the *dhami* and requests precision from her/him.

If not satisfied with the *dahmi*'s identification of the source of the problem, the client may consult another *dhami*.
When the client agrees with his explanation, the *dhami* starts telling the solution and requires action from the client.

The payment consists of offering *dhwaja* in the shrine, sacrificing an animal, or raising a goat or a sheep as offering to the god. The animal will be eaten after the sacrifice.
Usually the treatment session is short, other days of the week when the *dhami* is not engaged at *thalo,* they continue receiving clients for consultation at the veranda. Clients with lesser *dokh* or *roga* problems are treated with mantra, amulets, and local herbs. It is not uncommon for villagers to consult a dhami on their way to a healthcare facility or after their medical visit. (Subba, U. K., 2012).

A *jhangri* is a spirit intercessor, a healer but with a different tradition of practice. Though less in number than *dhamis*, the *jhangris* are believed to possess more power and have control over many gods and spirits.
S/he is also a religious/medical specialist and much closer to the definition of Shaman. Power to go into trance is necessary to become a *jhangri* but is not the only criteria.

S/He learns oral texts containing of the melo (recital) of the creation of the universe, the earth, man and woman, histories of malevolent forces, origins of disorders, the explanation of why the people suffer, grow old and die and the ways for curing.

A *jhangri* can enter a non-ordinary trance state considered as spirit possession. A shaman's success is his appropriate gesture, performance, rhythmic dancing, poetic and singing voice with the flow of the oral text.

In combination, they help to recreate a metaphysical world of gods, spirits, and ancient people and the genesis of human suffering and problems. The mythology, local histories, cultural experiences, and present suffering revenge into a meaningful interaction with the two worlds and coherent explanation of the relationship between the mythic world and the current problem.
With his ritual performance, action, recital of mantra and oral text, the jhangri involves the supernatural forces to bargain and reach appeasement by offering what is acceptable to the god and spirit.

Advice, suggestion and fear are created in the client/family or people responsible for the problem. What oral text a *jhangri* selects and what treatment he suggests depends on the nature of the illness and afflicting agent. Spirit possession, faith healing and ecstasy under shamanism are prevalent in Nepalese societies mostly in the context of mental distress, grief, emotional tension and so on (Peters, 1981:79-126).

Unfavorable planetary positions usually bring bad luck or bad health to the individual. People seek help with *jaisi*, also called *jyotisis* (astrologer) gurupurohit (priest). A *jaisi* prepares a *jantar* (amulet), aiming to guard the individual against supernatural forces and ward off *grhadasha* (star obstruction) and nightmares (dreaming of dead people). A *jantar* is a small paper pouch tied with a thread, usually containing a hand drawn astrological map with ashes, rice, or vermilion but powered by *mantra*. The preparation of an amulet depends upon the duration, type, and severity of the individual's problems, and is supposed to work effectively for a period of 15 days to a whole year. In some parts of the country it is known as *buti* even, generally, tied in people's neck and arms (Subba, U.K., 2012).

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