

The Value of Conformity is Contingent on the Conditions of the Society in Which We Live

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ABSTRACT

The problem with the stigma around mental health is really about the stories that we tell ourselves as a society.

Is mental illness a myth? Well, even if it was, a myth is not merely an age-old story told from generations to generations, it is a reality lived. Since ages, mental illness has been associated with negativity be it the demonish behavior or the possession by a witch or simply being crazy. The sensitivity of the issue of mental illness has increased following a decrease in society's sensitivity towards the mentally ill. It has a norm to label everybody in some or the other way in order to define their identity in terms of whether they are normally functioning and of use to society or simply abnormal.

So the greater question of reality is whether it is the people in the society who are really sick or is it the notions and norms of society that are sick. Is it that psychopathology arises out of sociopathology, or that psychopathology turns the society sick?

Keywords: Sociopathology; Psychopathology; Society sick; Simply abnormal; Mental illness

INTRODUCTION

The history of 'radical psychiatry' says that until the 19th century, illness was only concerned with alteration in body structure, it is only later after studies by Charcot, Freud etc. that an addition was made to the criterion of disease alteration in body functioning or mental sickness. Infact, the very question 'Do we live in a sick society?' iterates one to think in the direction of mental sickness of society [1].

However, for a long period of time, the concept of mental sickness was not fully accepted as thinkers like Szasz claimed that the body's disease was 'real' whereas there was nothing more in a mental disease than being a 'counterfeit' of the real one. Szasz believed that mental illness was nothing more than 'problems of living' and institutionalization of the so-called mentally sick would hamper the traditional doctor patient relationship. His arguments have been defended by many other psychiatrists. However, there have been studies which present the counter argument that mental illness is not actually a myth as, if it were, then there would be no legal or ethical dilemmas in regard to deciding about the punishment for crimes that the mentally sick patients commit (because according to Szasz insanity is as rational as sanity, and is motivated and goal directed) [2].

With this saga of arguments and debates on the myth vs. reality of mental illness, I have tried to present some viewpoints on the same [3].

There are a plethora of questions that come to mind within this domain. Certainly, one way to look at it is from the clinical perspective of psychological disorders leading to abnormal behavior in scientific terms. For instance, a person with dissociative identity disorder may be dysfunctional to such a level that they end up murdering people as a way of seeking revenge (probably for having lived a traumatic past) with the least idea of doing so. But again, can they be the real culprit? This puts the legal system in a dilemma whether to punish them for a crime that they never intended to commit. It may seem to a few people that the institution of ethics of psychology in the domain of psychopathology and abnormal behavior has a hollowed sense of responsibility, thus doing away with the 'sickness' of the mental patient. Yet, there is another section of society that argues that declaring someone as a criminal for being mentally sick is simply retarding their identity, without understanding the empathetic aspects of the entire scenario *i.e.*, of what led the person to commit such a thing [4].

LITERATURE REVIEW

The socio-cultural perspective on abnormal psychology has emphasized that often psychopathology results from sociopathology *i.e.*, mental sickness arises out of social ills. Since ages, several social ills have been deep rooted within society across the world. In the indian subcontinent, majorly, social problems like unemployment, corruption, female foeticides, dowry deaths, physical/sexual abuse etc., continue to degrade people's lives and increase their sufferings endlessly. Once these ills persist for a long period of time, or sometimes even by a single act such as sexual abuse, people lose the will and power to fight against them. They are unable to fight the social antigens and thus resort to psychological antigens, something which they feel gives them a control or power to make up for the sufferings done at the hands of the social ills. Cicchetti and tooth have shown that children with parental physical/sexual, or both, abuse become overly aggressive, even to the extent of bullying [5].

Another way of perceiving the sickness of society lies in the strong foundation of norms, rules and regulations, on which the building of society stands erect, in pride. This viewpoint extends far beyond the boundaries of abnormality set up by DSM-5 and defines abnormality as anything that deviates from the normal of society. For instance, norms based on appropriate gender behaviors label those who defy them as crazy or unacceptable in society. Society has a schema system of social roles which leads it to accepting only those women that fit into this framework of a submissive, obedient, staying behind the door figure, always aided by their knights in shining armor. So, any woman who is sassy, bold, speaks out her preferences openly and has the courage to go against the traditional norms to do something that she can own, is labeled as 'bad', 'derogatory' and of questionable character. Another instance that stands out is the LGBTQ+ community. Even though awareness has risen to an adequate level, yet, it has not trickled down to the deepest roots of society. There is still a vast section that degrades the community, considers them mentally sick, abnormal or crazy. So the question is, who is actually sick the defenders, such as in the instances above, women and the LGBTQ+, or the accusers who honor themselves as the so-called 'defendants of society'? Clearly, in the name of preaching for a better society, these accusers go so far beyond limits to humiliate or disgrace those whom they consider as abnormal, that it is no wonder to say that these normal people become abnormally sick in attempting to bring down the human race [6].

DISCUSSION

According to the points made above, it is clear that definitions of normality and sickness vary across societies and cultures. In Western cultures, addressing elders with their names is normal whereas in Indian culture, it is extremely disrespectful and not acceptable. A child displaying such behavior is labeled as 'arrogant', 'rude' or even 'crazy'.

Thus, society's hypocrisy is highlighted as across the world, the norms for normality and abnormality are different, despite the existence of the same human race everywhere, and in this hypocrisy lies the sickness of society that seeks to question the existence of each individual for their effectiveness to suit the needs and demands of society. Constant questioning by society leads to labeling which acts on a self-fulfilling prophecy as rewards of labeling like attention, sympathy or freedom from responsibility are internally reinforcing to an individual, thus encouraging them to continue playing the 'sick role' or to pursue the 'career of a mental patient'.

This questioning of one's truth at every step that they dare to make, leads to a system of irrational beliefs and dysfunctional assumptions such as 'I am not good at anything' or 'it is because of others that I have not been able to survive in the world', which pushes one further deep into the entrapping vicious circle of society's blame game and thus one's own negative cognition becomes the source of psychopathology.

The matter is not just about the sickness of society in labeling others. Infact, the sickness also lies in the 'craze' of materialization. The world of social media has put us in great danger. Online trolls, cyber hacks, blackmailing, fishing and what not society's sickness, be it in age shaming or body shaming, ridiculing someone for their choice of clothes or hacking one's private information and emotionally blackmailing them, is ever increasing. Where do the so called defendants of society go then to label these trolls as sick? Certainly, they themselves are the biggest trolls of all time.

CONCLUSION

Science has made some of the most notable and dynamic discoveries that changed the way of living in and understanding the world around us. Be it the revelation that Earth is round and not flat or that an apple falls down from a tree because of the force of gravity these discoveries have been deviant, rather defiant of what people used to believe for ages until they were proven wrong by one deviant individual. So if society acknowledges and felicitates such deviant, unusual changes, why not appreciate those who are unique and deviant from the normal that defines everybody on a single continuum?

A quick question for the readers to ponder upon is that is normality always a protector of mental health or is it that the understanding of normality, colored by the perceptual glasses of society, is impeding growth a beginning of abnormality? Surely, a mentally ill patient needs care and treatment but is constant questioning and labeling necessary at every step?

Is a deviant individual necessarily abnormal or can they are a revolutionary change maker?

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