

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

Report of the National Webinar on

“Community Mental Health: Issues, Challenges, and Opportunities”

(8th January 2022)

The Department of Psychology of SIES College of Arts, Science and Commerce (Autonomous), Sion, Mumbai organised a one-day National Webinar on Community Mental Health: Issues, Challenges and Opportunities on the 8th of January, 2022. A total of 116 individuals registered for it. This event was organised with the intention of creating awareness about the field of Community Psychology in the minds of students of the psychological discipline.

The Keynote Address on Community Mental Health Research in India was delivered by Dr Rahul Shidhaye, a Pune-based clinical psychiatrist and prominent epidemiologist who has led many research projects including the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) funded ESSENCE (Enabling translation of Science to Service to Enhance Depression Care). In his address, Dr Shidhaye stressed the importance of equal and easy access to mental health care for everyone. He was keen to highlight the need to develop culture-specific tools and interventions to address mental health distress in the Indian context.

He was followed by Dr Asha Banu Soletti, an incumbent professor at the Centre for Health and Mental Health, School of Social Work (SSW), Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Dr Soletti presented on the topic of Understanding the Dynamics of Communities. She emphasised the role played by social factors in the manifestation of mental health distress and thus also recognised the dire need for a paradigm shift, from the one that centres on the individual to one that involves the communal.

The third session that discussed Community Psychology in India: History and Scope was presented by Dr Sangeeta Bhatia, a Professor at Gargi College, the University of Delhi who has also meaningfully contributed to the book, “International Community Psychology: History and Theories”. Apart from reviewing the emergence and evolution of community psychology in India from an optimistic viewpoint, Dr Bhatia also addressed how a panacea, in this field, does not exist. That each situation demands a specific intervention to pragmatically address community-specific needs and distress. She also mentioned the actions required to revise the current curricula in order to sensitise and prepare students from a community-psychological perspective.

In the next session, Mr Nilesh Mohite talked about “Reaching out to communities for improving quality of life”. He talked about his work as a psychiatrist in over 25 remote districts of North East India. Dr. Mohite underlined that mental health practitioners should collaborate closely with various communities and think beyond the confines of their little clinics or hospitals. He urged aspiring young community psychologists to go beyond textbook knowledge and experience the feeling of working among the people with the resources they have. He also mentioned that the most important book was written by a group of people who have nothing to do with mental health.

The following session was conducted by Mr Mahendra Kanitkar a senior counsellor at Mukangan, Pune. Mukangan is a non-profit organisation working in the area of drug and alcohol de-addiction. His session narratively discussed the how-to of developing a sustainable model of Community Mental Health by using the case of Mukangan. He was sure to bring to the attendees’ attention that these interventions were developed on the recommendation of the individuals using Mukangan’s services and that none of this would be possible without community collaboration.

Dr Aparna Joshi, director of 2 field action projects at TISS, namely iCALL and Sukoon delivered the next session on Conducting Research with and for Communities. She elaborated on the steps involved in conducting community-based research and the values required of such a researcher. She emphasised the need for sharing control and meaningfully partnering with community members as essential for the morally and scientifically sound success of the project.

Finally, the Valedictory session was delivered by Dr Anand Nadkarni a renowned psychiatrist who pioneered the Institute of Psychological Health (IPH) and is the founder-trustee of Mukangan, Pune. He delivered an impassioned lecture on the grit and dedication the field demands. He motivated students to find the balance between clinical and community-based intervention prescriptions. He ensured to advise the attendees to relate theory to the living world and encouraged them to explore the psychological world beyond the textbooks.

The event wonderfully collated the messages of understanding mental health distress in the context of culture and community and of the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach to psychology by educating oneself on matters of politics/philosophy/sociology/economics. It highlighted the need for community-based research especially in the Indian subcontinent and provided students with practical steps to getting involved in the same. Event speakers actively

mentioned the challenges involved in community psychology in order to provide a holistic understanding to event attendees. By necessitating that such work is done with the consent and collaboration of communities, they were also careful to account for the ethics surrounding this work. The event unfailingly awakened a spirit of passion for the purpose of catering mental health services to the members of communities. Forums for discussion on topics such as Community Mental Health are the need of the hour and it sure would be prudent and essential to keep having these conversations.