

Feminism and gendered impact of COVID-19: Perspective of a counselling psychologist

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When women, girls and gender-diverse people – who have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak since the public health crisis has also become a crisis for feminism – will identify and acknowledge their organismic phenomenological self, wholeness and growth will be fully functioning. Psychological aspects for the public health emergency operated through counselling psychologists to manage mental health, emotional, psychological, cognitive, behavioural, relational and social impacts are fundamental. And the role of counselling psychologists in maintaining personal mental health and their clients is a crucial indicator of collective wellbeing. This perspective is embedded in the gendered approach and feminist framework which attempts to explore and offer the embodied intersectional and divergent impact on living during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

KEYWORDS

awareness, counselling psychologist, COVID-19 (coronavirus), feminism, gendered impact, growth, mental health

1 | ECLECTIC NARRATIVE

Humans struggle every single moment to maintain a sense of psychological structure and to have continuity with predictability. We yearn for the internal regulation that continuity and consistency provides us. We endeavour to have a flinch of an idea of what is going to transpire in the future. For someone, maybe screaming with excitement in boldness would be a great moment of psychological growth; a far more important change which mere retrospection cannot help in acquisition. For others, reflection and introspection would invite the spiritual mindful meditation as a process of psychological growth. However, the author's journey being a counselling psychologist holds different meaning and expedition during the pandemic outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis.

2 | PERSONAL NARRATIVE

*Yesterday is history,
Tomorrow is a mystery,
but today is a gift.
That is why it is called
the present.*

I can't exactly remember who quoted this, was it Lisa Unger or Bill Keane but I remember Oogway mentioning to Po in *Kungfu Panda* when he was dismayed and dwindled from past to future. Nostalgia nestles upon me, boughs of memoirs untie as scenes rise mildly with an ached insight. 2020 is the year which has brought collective memories of quarantine, isolation, distancing and negative emotions from everywhere and for everyone (Mukhtar, 2020a, 2020b).

I have always preferred to stand up for others and my own *integrity*. I am always inclined towards escalating in expressing my own experience through ardent writing, uplifting poetry, candid sketching, fluid body movement, attuning with nature and gratitude towards fiction, contemporary art, soul-soothing music, conspicuous motion pictures and the very epoch I breathe in – in my personal and private sphere. It has gradually become a *self-actualizing* experience for me that has stayed with me all these years – which I executed during the COVID-19 lockdown with slight effort. It was not the kind of change that any formal education, workshop, meetings, conferences, sessions or even psychological therapy demands but it has marked a turning point in my life. This imperative experience of *self-expression* taught me the significance of knowing my *know-thyself experience* proceeding to making clarifications or modifications in emotional, behavioural or attitudinal change during the lockdown. The quest of being free, fully functioning and holistic even more in a crisis situation is bringing a new personal reflection that the realization of the actualizing tendency can and will be fully activated.

2.1 | Professional narrative

I believe inventing therapy anew for each client because it's not about psychometrics; it's about accepting a person as is. As a basis for selecting techniques to employ on my clients, I prefer to look at the person as a thinking, feeling and behaving person. I work with these three dimensions in an integrative fashion rather than in a linear fashion. My genuine interest in other people by valuing them for who they are and my positive regard for their *phenomenal* field is my highest form of philosophy, perspective and existence: I'm OK and You're OK. If I am to be effective in facilitating my client's psychological growth, I need to be empathetic to who they are (regardless of age, race, ethnicity, economic status, geographical status, religion, migration status, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and others) and help them in appreciation of the functioning of their emotions, behaviours, attitudes and relational patterns. This subtlety obliges truly knowing and valuing the other person's phenomenological experience, attachment patterns and manners of coping with 'life' itself.

Such cherished interpersonal knowing and attunement cannot be very comfortable to every mental health practitioner's personal equilibrium because absolute valuing of the other person's way of being in their world may or may not alter our frame of reference. Counselling psychologists prefer the distinction of the idea of being altered with a growth process which is 'if I am to facilitate the personal growth of others in relation to me, then I must grow, and while this is often painful it is also enriching' and has been vastly challenged during this unprecedented public health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak – which is evident from the narrative account of a great deal of mental health practitioners during this period as they embark on wondering about humanity, mortality, privilege and the human rights that launched this incredible consequential insight.

2.2 | Counselling and psychotherapeutic narrative

The process of psychological growth or self-actualization requires meaningful and contact-ful interaction with other persons. In the therapeutic relationship, as in theory and practice, there should be this sense that each person can impact the other person. Counselling psychologist-client certain *attunement* requires understanding of the needs and feelings that are fixated in the client's experience. Not merely an understanding, attunement is rather a kinaesthetic and emotional sensing of the other person – knowing their experience by metaphorically being in their skin. Effective attunement basically requires that the counselling psychologist remain aware of the boundary between client and counselling psychologist and keep the clients aware as well.

The effective and timely *communication* of attunement validates the client's needs and emotions and sets the foundation for building a therapeutic relationship. Attunement can be delivered and effectively heard by demonstration of what we say, affirming, acknowledging and validating the experiences and emotions of the clients such as 'that must be hard', 'you seemed frightened' or 'it is okay to feel', 'you needed someone to be there with you'. As a matter of fact, it should be more frequently communicated by the counselling psychologist's facial expressions or body movements signalling to the client that their presence 'exists' and 'matters'.

Involvement begins with the counselling psychologist's commitment to the client's wellbeing and a reverence for the client's phenomenological experience. Full therapeutic contact becomes promising when the client experiences that the counselling psychologist: respects the client's needs, stays attuned to their feelings and needs, sensitive to the age and stage of the client's psychological functioning and that the counselling psychologist is interested in understanding the client's understanding and frame of reference.

Presence is provided by the counselling psychologists' persevere empathetic response by delivering both verbal and nonverbal expressions to the clients. It ensues when the behaviour and communication of the counselling psychologist regards and emphasizes the client's integrity. Presence includes the counselling psychologist's receptivity to the client's needs, that is, to being moved by the client's unique and individual life and yet not to become angry, anxious or depressed. Attunement, Communication, Involvement and Presence are the author's narrative expressions and recommendations (extracted from the work experience at the shelter homes for women and children and counselling-psychotherapeutic services) for mental health practitioners' availability, responsibility and reliability in the application of the true spirit of the psychological implication of the counselling and psychotherapeutic process during and after the coronavirus period.

This global pandemic crisis' interference should not bind the psychological energy and drain away effective functioning in the here-and-now reality for a long time. It is a common saying that only the wounded physician heals and counselling psychologists' personal reflective experience grew out of their existential philosophic tradition during this crisis period would only reinforce their empathetic regard to their clients. That's where their journey started – having vulnerable thinking about 'what will I do if I win to the periphery of what happens if I lose'. Psychological aspects for the public health emergency operated through counselling psychologists (and other mental health practitioners) to strengthen personal and collective mental health, manage wellbeing, emotional, psychological, behavioural and social impacts are crucial during this lockdown.

3 | 'COUNSELLING SESSIONS' EMBEDDED IN THEORY, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

When women, girls and gender-diverse people – who have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak since the public health crisis has also become a crisis for feminism – will identify and acknowledge their organismic phenomenological self, wholeness and growth will be fully functioning. Being not able to emotionally confront the abuser and perpetrator while living in the same vicinity could form interjects by repeating the same retroreflection patterns instead of voicing concerns in front of a support system. This keeps going over and over

in the heads of the survivors and they can see that people take them for granted and they are aware of it and yet they cannot confront or stop or save them – just in turn retroflex dealing with all the hurt and pain inside because it evoked and incited further hurt and pain. If they are open in their subjective perception they may become a part of their environment and influence their personal, private and public space. Instead of dwindling between deflection/hyper-sensitivity, introjects/refusal to accommodate, projection/literalness and confluence/isolation – start practically living and experiencing these needs to have effective self-regulation and emotional regulation on the voyage of holism.

This causes one to remember the conditions of worth which predominantly affected those who seek approval of others which reinforced behaviours that 'I would only be acknowledged, safe and happy with the abusive partner if I follow their decisions and agree with what they say.' These decisions are never confronted because 'YOU' are neither supposed to question nor answer back. This caused feeling of incongruence and inevitable high demands and expectations take many to the gloomy road of negative self-concept which carries a sense of inadequacy which will be exuberated tenfold during the isolation of the COVID-19 period (Mukhtar, 2020c; Rana, Mukhtar, & Mukhtar, 2020). Internalization of conditions and introjections cannot permeate anyone's significant visceral experiences into consciousness.

It is also necessary to realize that this external locus of evaluation could become so strong that many have been accepting others' decisions though they did feel a little incongruous at times but the rigidity of self-structure didn't allow them to act upon their actualizing tendency. Moreover, all this led to feelings of guilt, reinforces a sense of being responsible for everything – a good set of feelings, attitudes and behaviour patterns which are neither relics of relational abusive patterns, nor resembling the abusive surroundings are not so rare that one cannot adapt to the current reality – during and after the COVID-19 period.

3.1 | Clients' organismic growth

The freedom of individuals is acknowledged, when it is viewed as self-determining and creating their whole lives. When women, girls and gender-diverse people will identify with their whole self, when they acknowledge whatever aspect arises at a moment, the conditions for wholeness and growth are created. Having an awareness of their own needs, flourishing dialogic relationship 'I-thou' and working with the resistance which requires full phenomenological awareness – sensation, feelings and thoughts which come together as an experience of need will they grow. By giving oneself unconditional positive regard and creating healthy boundaries with others, one can start to free oneself from old patterns so they can have openness to experience, learn to live fully instead of in denial or distorted self and trust their organismic decisions in order to be fully functioning. What to learn from these experiences is that it is important to find links between emotional release and new levels of emotional awareness. Insight often follows the process of an emotional release. And this internal frame of reference should not be disregarded and discomforted rather the acknowledgement of injunctions and prohibitions, praise, blame and psychological strokes and emotional experiences would be a sheer mockery, in the door of an action had it not been free to choose.

This situation produces anxiety, which leads to negative emotions, and the unexpressed anger is turned inward creating repression of feelings. The more negative emotions they experience, the more helplessness they feel; the more helplessness they experience, the more anxiety they feel; the more anxiety, the more hopelessness; the more hopelessness, the greater possibility of experiencing the incongruent self or un-real self.

An aha experience came when a healthy boundary is permeable for exchanges with the environment and firm enough to allow autonomy which is garnered, nurtured and embedded. But sometimes the process of moving freely can be interrupted when organismic experience is not accommodated in self-structure or cause fixation/fickleness/clutter or when the environmental factors initiate shifts in psychological ego-states. If restrictions are imposed through internalized values then narrow down options for need fulfilment. The organic need persists

and optimal living takes place when self-concept allows organic experience into self-structure. These counselling constructs are embedded in self-reflection during this crisis' gendered impact.

3.2 | Personal narrative account on the aha experience of a fully functioning being

I feel my amorphous attention being cultivated and swathed inside my bottomless womb. I am not alone, but yet there are no others here, I am in solitude. I am infinite and extensive; I am suddenly encompassing the Earth, the Sun, the Moon and the entire universe. I am fuller than the Cosmos, I am full potentiality! Layer upon layer of unmanifesting my consciousness, further I abandon the accustomed mind to assimilate this new understanding. Unbridled, virgin power explodes as I witness the experience of the foundation of my existence.

I am beyond contemplation, beyond emotion, beyond rationale, beyond dimension, as I marvel in the tranquillity and simplicity of self-unfolding. I wish that's all, transforming self and feelings are equally easy as it sounds. I sense, I feel, I imagine, I do, I perceive, I am aware and I am mindful! Time and space were frozen like a wholly crystallized melodic lyric serenading me with the voice of a thousand angels faintly whispering melodies of times present here and now dragging me from the past. Something calls to me to reveal its elusive face, the face of the Present moment – an oddly saccharine paradigm of reality. The frustration chases it to the bare periphery of my consciousness sternly warning me of my awareness zones. I feel lightheaded out of my imposed cocoon into an unfamiliar abyss of joyful knowing. I am finally conceived! As the blossom of my heart gently awakens and turns toward the entrancing gleam of 'my' radiating presence, every goodness awaits me. Besides the troubles of life, there is also goodness but surprisingly in one place.

That moment, that profound moment when I learn that we can change and by consistent tries we can change our behaviour, we can feel the feelings and we can develop our relational cognitive patterns is the initiation – start of the journey where we lead our roles away from a *no-one* to a fully functioning being, which is first marked by some level of confusion and then came the wellbeing like a pumping pad after a while we would start getting introduction to our authentic self by exploring the grief and anger. I wonder how that explosion of anxious joy can turn us!

4 | CONCLUSION

It is important for mental health practitioners and every single individual to address their mental health, monitor thoughts, pacify emotions, modify behaviours, and remain aware of physical sensations and lived experience from the possible unfinished business and clutter in the *ground* which could create distortion '*self/not-self*', '*feel/not-feel*' because the foreground is the *I* in the *now*. These emerging needs unmet at this time would continue to assert themselves and confusions would arise in awareness zones of mindfulness characterized by mental health and psychological problems. This impasse would proscribe for full meaningful contact with the environment.

As a result of this unfinished business, some might start projecting their feelings onto others, their needs and preferences might be blurred beyond the realm of the environment. Remember, it is OKAY to feel – to feel the emotions of pain and inadequacy which this situation originally produced in everyone and not everyone may be aware of the same interpretation. There is a huge difference between simply remembering an experience and *reliving* an event, full emotional responsivity as if it were happening in the present. The present is a profound moment experienced here-and-now but by reliving the past and by accepting that yesterday is but today's memory and tomorrow is today's dream would one figure out which parts of personality are *real* and which are created to please others.

It is never too late to ask yourself, 'Am I ready to change the life I am living? Am I ready to change within?' Even if a single day in your life is the same as the day before, it surely is a pity. At every moment and with each new breath, one should be renewed and renewed again. (Shafaq, 2010, p. 336)

To conclude, acknowledgement of being congruent, having empathy and unconditional positive regard for self and others would help everyone to become aware of these conditions of worth and also to break these old patterns and allow the new actualizing tendency to play its full part to have openness to experience, learn to live fully instead of living in denial or with a distorted self-image and trust personal organismic decisions in order to be fully functioning. The mind and personality which have learned to stretch by new experiences and new learning refuse to go back to a misplaced and convoluted set of teachings from the old patterns.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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How to cite this article: Mukhtar S. Feminism and gendered impact of COVID-19: Perspective of a counselling psychologist. *Gender Work Organ*. 2020;27:827–832. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12482>