

Chapter 59

Syrian Youth, War, and Community Approach to Stigma Surrounding Psychological Intervention

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will discuss why countries that emerge from prolonged civil wars need to provide their citizens with adequate mental health services and make a reference to Syria as a case study. It will demonstrate an association between mental disorders and violence which threatens the stability, national security, and the aspired recovery of the country. The chapter will refer to young people as they are the future in process and the makers of the future change in Syria. However, rather than listing or discussing solutions, the chapter will take a community approach to stigma and discuss how a shift in the way the Syrian society views and approaches mental illness is necessary to alleviate stigma and its impact. The chapter will also show how minority groups among the Syrian youth are subject to an aggravated level of stigma. In doing so, the chapter will address various social concepts such as youth, masculinity, community, and society.

INTRODUCTION

Although a global phenomenon, stigma impacts societies on various levels and in different ways. Stigma surrounding mental illness and psychological interventions is discussed in this chapter. It will address why mental illness is stigmatised and how this may discourage individuals with mental illness to seek help and support. The chapter will discuss how this situation may amount to disorder and deviance in societies that were and are hit by wars and conflicts. This chapter will discuss why countries that emerge from prolonged civil wars need to provide their citizens with adequate mental health services and make a reference to Syria as a case-study. It will demonstrate an association between mental disorders and

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violence which threatens the stability, national security and the aspired recovery of the country. The chapter will refer to young people as they are the future in process and the makers of the future change in Syria. However, rather than listing or discussing solutions, the chapter will take a community approach to stigma and discuss how a shift in the way the Syrian society view and approach mental illness is necessary to alleviate stigma and its impact. It will also show how minority groups among the Syrian youth are subject to an aggravated level of stigma. In doing so, the chapter will address various social concepts such as youth, masculinity, community and society.

Stigma as a Global Issue

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental illness precedes any other health issue in the world. It estimates that 450 million people worldwide suffer from mental health conditions, whereby 60% do not receive any form of care. It also reports that 90% of people in developing countries are receiving no form of care. Those labelled as mentally ill are subject to more severe stigma than individuals with other forms of non-mental illnesses (Corrigan et al., 2000). With the concealable nature of mental illnesses, impacted individuals may decide to circumvent treatment and psychological intervention to avoid stigma surrounding it (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). Hence stigma has been identified as one of the reasons that prevent people from receiving the necessary care and support they need. It manifests itself in social distancing, whereby people with mental issues feel isolated and labelled. Among many reasons, stigma originates from personal, social and family sources. It is further augmented by social factors such as lack of awareness, lack of education, lack of perception, and the nature and complications of the mental illness manifested in the individual.

Gaining increased awareness of the long-term impact of mental illness and the way it shapes the present and future of mentally ill individuals, many societies have taken robust measures to alleviate its impact. This is done by various means on both official and public levels. Many campaigns have taken to the media to address mental health, with the aim of breaking through the barriers that prevent people from seeking the help they need. This involved celebrities who shared their experiences and how about they sought help and support. This, arguably, might have contributed to individuals with past or present mental disorders, increasingly stepping forward and sharing their experience.

However, as it appears to be the case, raising awareness is not enough. Whether the response action commensurate with the seriousness of mental health and its impact on both global and international levels is disputed matter. While the capacity of national health systems to accommodate and provide services that deal with mental illness varies across countries and nations, stigma remains an issue that hinders a lot of people with mental illness to receive the support appropriate to their situation.

What is noteworthy here is that stigma is a common concept across the globe. One of the most cited definitions of stigma is that of Goffman who referred to it as ‘an attribute that is deeply discrediting’ (Goffman 1963: 13). Further definitions that developed over times indicate a lack of consensus among scholars about the definition of stigma. The World Health Organisation defines stigma as ‘a mark of shame, disgrace or disapproval which results in an individual being rejected, discriminated against, and excluded from participating in a number of different areas of society’ (WHO, 2001). It is composed of interpersonal or public stigma and intrapersonal or self-stigma. The role of stigma as a barrier to seek psychological support emerges when individuals endorse and internalise negative attitudes and opinions about mental illness and intervention means (Sewilam et al., 2014).

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