

Workshop on Family and Mental Health

The workshop on family and mental health took place on April 19, 2003 at Anveshi. The workshop sought to focus on the various intersections and modes of interactions between the family, distress and mental health care. It addressed concerns in understanding distress, the question of care, issues in working with families and the legal implication for the family as caregiver. The idea of the workshop on "The Family and Mental Health" came from the many discussions in the study group on mental health at Anveshi. In the study group, several issues relating to the understanding of and coping with distress were debated in the context of the family. These debates highlighted the fact that what each of us understand as the family was necessarily different – a difference that is not simply in terms of an ahistorical experience of the family, but rooted in the changing modes in which the family was being articulated. The workshop sought to look closely at the articulations of and negotiations with mental distress in the context of the family.

In the introductory paper titled "The Family and Mental Health: Some Concerns," Jayasree Kalathil (Anveshi) laid out the current concerns about the family in mental health research. She focused on the specificity of each approach. She pointed out that statist interventions and policies for instance look at the family as an isolated and self-sufficient unit. Work informed by feminist thinking on the other hand calls for a more nuanced understanding of the family's ways of taking care of the mentally distressed. Jayasree also spoke about the involvement in the debates around mental health from caregivers' groups in recent times. She concluded by arguing that the significance of mental distress and the experiences of it need to be placed within institutions, language, interactions and discourse for a more nuanced engagement with the subject.

The presentation titled "Family and the Articulation of Emotions" by Bindulakshmi (IIT, Mumbai) focused on the need to critically look at the articulations of various emotions within the family, which are often constructed as ignoring an individual's personal rights and choices. Focusing on the interpersonal relationships within the

family, the paper called for a rearticulation of familial emotions, which are usually understood as natural and universal. Bindu argued that in order to fully understand the dynamics of individual emotions within the family, we need to disentangle the idea of the family as the only space of emotional sustenance.

Sadhana Vohra's (The Psychological Foundations, Delhi) presentation titled "Working with Families of Distressed People" continued the discussion on the family. Looking at her clinical practice, Sadhana shared her sense that the issue of "my family" and "what they have done to me" has been critical when working on mental health. In this process, several emotions and interactions need to be examined. Sadhana explained that a therapist's work is to help identify support and separate it from control and to facilitate the client to work with the support to enhance her mental health. She also examined the ways in which identified clients and their families begin to impinge on each other and the role the therapist has in the process of working with the client.

Madhumeeta Sinha (Anveshi) spoke on the representations of mental health in cinema and based her presentation titled "Representations of Mental Illness in Hindi Films," on three recent films, *Aankhein*, *Deewangi* and *Road*. She pointed out that in the films released in recent times, characters who have suffered some form of mental illness are often the chief agents, sometimes heroic and at other times villainous, in the narrative. Unlike in earlier films, where a kind of narrative resolution was offered in terms of cure, incarceration or death of the mentally ill character that brings the family or the society back into order, these three films offer no resolution. There seems to be a difficulty in containing this madness. She explored the implications of this turn in the representative modes by referring to the historical context of Hindi cinema's engagement with issues of mental illness.

Amita Dhanda (NALSAR, Hyderabad) began her presentation "Mental Illness, Family and the Law: The Competing Concerns of Protection and Transgression" by briefly examining why the law needs to intervene at all in the area of mental health. She then went on to speak about the instances which show how the legal order battles with the competing questions of the family as protector and as transgressor and the

implications of this approach to both the persons with mental illness and the family. According to Amita, the law basically essentializes both the family and the person with mental illness. There is no recognition of the nuances of either the family or of mental illness. While there seems to be some suspicion in matters regarding property, there is no such acknowledgement in matters like person liberty of the person with mental illness.

K.Lalita, Sheela Prasad, Veena Shatrugna and Vasudha Nagaraj, from Anveshi, spoke on the panel on "Questions of Care." Lalita and Sheela based their presentation on interviews they conducted with two persons diagnosed with schizophrenia and their families as also their discussion with one of the psychiatrists practicing in Hyderabad. They presented some of the significant findings of their study in terms of the approach taken by the psychiatrists, the process of caring for the mentally ill person, the question of space, support, social contact and modes of coping devised by the carer, the difficulties faced by them.

Veena's presentation brought out the specific attributes of mental distress, especially as it differed from organic problems. Given the complexities associated with mental distress and illness, and given that it is the family which is the most involved and is also the one caught in complicated patterns of communication, Veena raised the question of whether family is the best place for care. The family, she pointed out, is fairly burdened and the stress placed on it produces all kinds of skewed reactions. She argued that we need to do a lot more work in the area of mental illness in order to find out how to open up new spaces that can give the right kind of care, love and perhaps medication.

Based on her own experience, Vasudha talked about the complex nature of being a carer. Vasudha also pointed out that caregivers are of different categories. A child needs one kind of caregiver and an aged parent another kind of caregiver. Talking of the situations that could lead to stress for a child Vasudha mentioned the formal system of education and the concern all around about earning a livelihood. Vasudha

went on to emphasize that in the context of mental illness, what is required is a superior kind of care, a very challenging kind of caregiving.