CHAPTER 2

The place of Nepal in Psychological Anthropology

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Aidan Seale-Feldman[1]

[1]Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame

Abstract

What role has Nepal played in the field of psychological anthropology? Psychological anthropology is a subfield of anthropology traditionally concerned with the study of culture, mind, experience, self, and person. Over the past 50 years, a number of psychological anthropologists have conducted person-centered ethnographic research in Nepal, and from this research developed influential work—both theoretical and applied. This essay reviews the history of psychological anthropology in Nepal and considers the place of Nepal as an ethnographic site in the production of knowledge for psychological anthropology from studies of self, person, and experience to its applications in the field of global mental health.

Keywords: psychological anthropology, ethnography, global mental health, Nepal

The place of Nepal in Psychological Anthropology

Theoretical and Methodological Orientations

What role has Nepal played in the field of psychological anthropology? Psychological anthropology is a subfield of anthropology traditionally concerned with the study of culture, mind, experience, self, and person, with deep roots in the history of the discipline as developed in North America. From the beginning of the Culture and Personality School to contemporary psychological anthropology, a largely North American tradition of anthropology has generated foundational work on the relation between culture and psychology (Boas, 1911; Bateson, 1972; Benedict, 1934; Hallowell, 1955; Mead, 1963), pioneering studies of ethnopsychology (Devereux, 1951; Levy, 1975; Wikan, 1990); the cross-cultural variation of emotion (Briggs, 1971; Lutz & Abu-Lughod, 1990; Rosaldo, 1980); psychoanalytic anthropology (Crapanzano, 1980; Ewing, 1997; Hollan, 2003; Hollan, 2012; Obeyesekere, 1981;Obeyesekere, 1990; Pandolfo, 1997; Spiro, 1982); culture and psychiatry (Carstairs & Kapur, 1976; Good, 1994; Jenkins & Barrett, 2004; Kleinman, 1980; Young, 1997); and the phenomenology of experience (Csordas, 1990; Csordas, 1993; Csordas, 2002; Desjarlais, 1992; Desjarlais, 2003; Throop, 2010). In a departure from what some considered to be de-politicized studies of self, emotion, and culture, a subsequent generation of scholars turned to the study of subjectivity by exploring how political, socioeconomic, and structural forces shape individual subjective experience (Biehl, 2005; Cohen, 1998; Das, 2007; Garcia, 2010; Han, 2012; Kleinman, Das & Lock, 1997; Pinto, 2014). In light of these developments, most recently the field of psychological anthropology has begun to strengthen its ties to the global mental health movement with the aim of infusing anthropological insights on culture, emotion, experience, and mental health into a development model otherwise dominated by psychiatry and drug-based therapeutics (Abramowitz, 2010; Good, Good & Grayman, 2010; Jenkins, 2015; Kohrt & Mendenhall, 2016). Since the 1980s, Nepal has played an important role for psychological anthropology, serving as a site from which scholars have developed and engaged central theories and

approaches in the discipline. This essay traces psychological anthropology of and in Nepal throughout these various movements.

Across the field of psychological anthropology, both in Nepal and elsewhere, the approach of "person-centered" interviewing and ethnography has been a central methodology used to study individuals as they shape and are shaped by social, material, and cultural contexts (Levy & Hollan, 1998). Inspired in part by psychotherapeutic modalities, Robert Levy and Douglas Hollan's approach to "person-centered" interviewing goes beyond the collection of life histories to elicit aspects of self-experience that may normally be hidden from view (Levy & Hollan, 1998). As in a psychoanalytic session, person-centered interviewing creates a non-judgmental space for the interviewee to reflect on him or herself in response to a specific set of self-related questions, while the interviewer attends to the manner and mood in which such self-reflection unfolds in response. In person-centered interviewing, the interviewer approaches the interviewee as both an expert informant about a given topic and individual respondent reflecting on their own personal experience and feelings about the topic at hand.

A central aim of person-centered interviewing is to understand "what is at stake" for a given person in their life, from their perspective and point of view (Kleinman, 1997). Following Levy and Hollan (1998), topic categories for person-centered interviewing begin with basic informal conversations about "locating information" and then progress to open-ended questions focused on more personal topics such as identity formation; aspects of self; morality; the body; stress, illness, and healing; death; emotion; religion and the supernatural; fantasy, creative art, dreams; and children. Over the past 50 years, a number of psychological anthropologists have conducted "person-centered" ethnographic research in Nepal, and from this research developed influential work–both theoretical and applied. This essay reviews the history of psychological anthropology in Nepal and considers the place of Nepal as an ethnographic site in the production of knowledge for psychological anthropology from studies of self,

person, and experience to its applications in the field of global mental health.

Culture and Mind

In the mid-1970s, Robert Levy, a scholar long celebrated for his influential writing on culture, mind, and emotion in Tahiti as well as the development of the method of "person-centered" interviewing, began conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Bhaktapur. At the general level, Levy approached his fieldwork in Nepal as part of a comparative study of mind and experience across radically different social and cultural contexts.[1] Based on collaborative fieldwork with Kedar Raj Rajopadhyaya, Levy published *Mesocosm: Hinduism and the Organization of a Traditional Newar City in Nepal,* a thick tome that intended to explore the "reciprocal relations of the public life of communities and the private worlds of their members" (Levy, 1990, p. 1). Across the project, Levy's theoretical task was to examine the relationship between individual and community by tracing the "psychological and personal 'resonances' of the symbolic order" (Levy, 1990, p. 3). The text aimed to examine the complex relationship between the community and the individual by way of what Levy called the "mesocosm," the "organized meaningful world intermediate to the microcosmic worlds of individuals and the culturally conceived macrocosm, the universe, at whose center the city lies" (Levy, 1990, p. 2).

Mesocosm outlines the complex religious life and system of symbols that, according to Levy, organized social life in the Newari city of Bhaktapur. Yet it was precisely this complexity that ultimately stalled Levy's study, for he found the cultural and social context so highly detailed that he ultimately never published the second part of the project—an in-depth, person-centered study of eight Newari individuals. As such, *Mesocosm* ultimately focuses on "the symbolic ordering of Bhaktapur" (Levy, 1990, p. 8) through the varying

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[1] Levy conceptualized Tahiti as a "simple" society, while Bhaktapur represented the maximum possible "complexity."

rhythms, tempos, and cycles of life, organization of space, hierarchies, and religious systems that organize life in the ancient city. While Levy stopped short in his study of the relationship between individual and culture in Bhaktapur, the next generation of psychological anthropologists working in Nepal would soon follow in his footsteps with person-centered studies of emotion, mind, self, and subjectivity, across diverse ethnic groups in the Nepal Himalayas.

Emotion and Self

Following in Levy's footsteps, Steven Parish published *Moral Knowing in a Hindu Sacred City* in 1994. This text can be considered a work of ethnopsychology, as it begins from the grounding assumption that culture is a force that both shapes and is shaped by mind and experience. Parish describes this work as a person-centered study of culture and mind in the Newari community of Bhakatpur, with a specific focus on the "inner lives" of Newari people, the development of "moral selves," and the "making of moral consciousness" in relation to particular aspects of Newari Hindu culture.[2] Throughout the text, Parish focuses on moral emotions, moral concepts, and ritualized rites of passage as sites that "link the moral order and the experiencing self, and sustain self-making and culture-making, thus producing…moral knowing" (Parish, 1994, p. 279).

Parish's exploration of moral knowing is grounded in a study of Newari personhood. Similar to the classical work on "dividualism" in South Asia (Marriott, 1976), Parish sees Newari persons as socially interdependent.[3] Here Parish suggests that Newari life is defined by what he calls a "web of relatedness"—the idea that one's sense of self emerges through modes of relatedness to others. While in the Euro-

[2] Similar to other work published in anthropology during this period, here "Newars" are written about in a way that suggests a monolithic, essentialized cultural group despite the author's attention to individual differences between people.

[3] The (much debated) concept of "dividualism" refers to the notion that the unit of the bounded individual is meaningless in South Asia, a region where high value is placed on interdependency.

American cultural context interdependence may be seen as threatening, Parish argues that for Newari people, merging and interdependence are sought out. As Parish puts it, it is "more likely that Newars 'find themselves' in relationships and 'lose themselves' by separating" (Parish, 1994, p. 129). It is within this context of interdependence that a "moral self" emerges. While the experience of merging, the loss of the self in the other, is simultaneously feared and desired, Parish observes that for many people with whom he worked, being detached and isolated was also commonly understood to be a cause of suffering, generating symptoms similar to depression and anxiety (Parish, 1994, p. 170). Parish ultimately connects his discussion of interdependence and relatedness to the question of empathy, proposing that concepts of shared substance, relatedness, care, and remembering others through ritual duties may serve as a cultural foundation that enables Newari people to experience stronger forms of empathy.[4] Here Parish suggests that it is possible that "empathy is culturally more accessible to Newars of either gender than it is to many Americans" (Parish, 1994, p. 165).

At the heart of Parish's text is his discussion of moral knowing, a concept that links emotion, feeling, consciousness, and experience to the domain of culture, morality, and ethics. Parish starts by outlining the moral norms and codes people live by, focusing on the shared perception that society, *samaj,* is itself a moral force held up by one's sense of duty to *dharma*. In this way, Parish identifies *dharma* as an ethical domain regulated by social expectations for conformity to the moral order.

From moral norms Parish moves to moral emotions, focusing specifically on the emotion of *lajja,* glossed in English as a combination

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[4] This idea is further developed through Parish's discussion of purity and pollution, and the ways certain essences of a person or object's nature are able to penetrate the bodies of others by being transmitted through food, water, touch, or gaze. Yet that which may pollute can also be a medium of desired incorporation, as in the case of food shared between a family.

of embarrassment, shyness, and shame.[5] Parish sees *lajja* as a "moral state of being and consciousness" (Parish, 1994, p. 201) as it serves both as a form of social regulation and self-evaluation. *lajja* also has strong gendered implications, for the ideal woman is virtuous and expresses her virtue in shy and indirect ways through the embodiment of *lajja* (Parish, 1994, p. 201). Additionally, *lajja* is implicated in relations of hierarchy, as the subordinate should feel *lajja* in front of his or her superior. While *lajja* is a desirable trait among women, an excess of *lajja* among men is deemed undesirable. As Parish writes, *lajja* is a deeply intersubjective emotion which "involves self-restraint that withholds personal desire from public interaction" (Parish, 1994, p. 203). As a moral emotion that involves moral judgment, *lajja* is both a desirable quality to be cultivated, and an undesirable experience connected to feelings of shame.[6] To lack the capacity to feel *lajja* is to be likened to an animal, that is, no longer human (Parish, 1994, p. 201).

While the anthropology of ethics and morality would soon become a central area of theoretical debate, at the time of the publication of *Moral Knowing,* few anthropologists had conducted person-centered research on morality (Mattingly & Throop, 2018). In this way, Parish's work can be considered an early, pathfinding text in the anthropology of moral experience.

Illness, Healing, and the Phenomenology of Experience

Among the most well-known studies of emotion and experience in Nepal is Robert Desjarlais' *Body and Emotion,* an ethnography of illness and healing among the Yolmo Buddhist people of Helembu

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[5] Here I follow Parish's use of the Newari language term *lajya,* which is identical to *laj* in Nepali.

[6] Parish is not the only psychological anthropologist to become fascinated with the emotion of *laj* in Nepal. In her work with a Gurung community in Nepal, Ernestine McHugh also discusses *laj* and the ways in which it is tied up with notions of honor (*ijjat*). For Gurungs, McHugh writes, honor is a motivational force; "for men and women to have shame (*laj lagnu*) is for them to behave in such a way as to enhance their honor: that is, to restrain their passions, defer to others when appropriate, and, for women, to maintain proper feminine decorum" (McHugh 1998).

(Desjarlais, 1992).[7] In undertaking this work in the late 1980s, Desjarlais studied the healing ceremonies of a local *bombo,* shaman, and followed his work through the full immersion in participant observation. The ethnographer as apprentice played the shaman's drum and even sometimes entered into trance himself. In this way *Body and Emotion* explores Yolmo ways of expressing emotion, illness, and healing through an embodied, "experience near" approach. Here the anthropologist not only studies the experiences of illness and healing of others, but also uses his own body as a proxy for a partial understanding of the cultural shaping of experience itself. A key insight offered by *Body and Emotion* is that the incorporation of the ethnographer's own embodied knowledge and attempts to learn new ways of moving and being (such as entering into trance) can be a powerful method for exploring the cultural shaping of behavior and sensory experience–what Desjarlais calls "the 'aesthetic' nature of everyday life" (Desjarlais, 1992, p. 14).

The central form of suffering explored in *Body and Emotion* is "soul loss" (losing *bla*), a common affliction caused by a sudden fright which scares the soul out of the body, forcing it to wander in a dangerous landscape of hungry ghosts, witches and demons. To lose one's *bla* is to lose "the will and spirit to act in life" (Desjarlais, 1992, p. 140), as *bla* is the source of energy and vitality. In order to return a wandering soul to its body, a shaman must discern the forces that cause a soul to take flight. By entering into a ritual trance, the shaman "searches for and attempts to 'call' the lost life-force back into the body of his patient" (Desjarlais, 1992, p. 13). Desjarlais uses "soul loss" as a lens into the relationship between culture and emotional distress, and the ways in which cultural forces shape embodiment and somatic sensibilities. Crucially, instead of automatically translating "soul loss" as "depression," Desjarlais engages a phenomenological approach to the study of affliction on its own terms, focusing on how it feels, what it

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[7] Today many Yolmo people prefer to use the spelling Hyolmo in public references. This chapter follows the spelling "Yolmo" used in Desjarlais' 1992 text in order to be faithful to the original reference.

means, and how it is connected to a particular, culturally and historically shaped ways of understanding and being-in-the-world.

Desjarlais' exploration of soul loss is grounded in detailed descriptions and analyses of Yolmo notions of body, soul, epistemology, and forms of shamanic healing. For example, early on in the text Desjarlais outlines basic conceptualizations of the body as mapped onto space and builds his analysis from this foundation. "Yolmo bodies represent a microcosm of the universe…Celestial measures of high and low, as with other aspects of Yolmo culture, find their way into the body" (Desjarlais, 1992, p. 42). The body understood in this way is organized along lines ranging between purity and impurity, in what Desjarlais calls the "moral topographies of the body" (Desjarlais, 1992, p. 43). Such corporal topographies regard the head as high and pure, and the feet as low and impure. Similar spatial hierarchies of purity play out in everyday bodily comportment in relation to others, in which seating arrangements are organized vertically, such that higher status individuals are seated above others. The body itself is often compared to a house, where the boundary between inner and outer is clearly defined. Fears of foreign penetration become salient in Yolmo worries about the possibility of evil spirits or ghosts entering their bodies. In this way, for Yolmo people, health "not only implies well-being on an individual, bodily scale; it means that one's familial, social, and cosmic relations proceed as a harmonious whole" (Desjarlais, 1992, p. 161). Desjarlais finds that for Yolmo people, an excess of emotions, either positive or negative, are known to cause illness and suffering.[8] Desjarlais argues that such spatial organizations of the body and related desires for harmony and equilibrium are central to understanding the ways in which Yolmo people experience illness and find healing.

In addition to mapping Yolmo orientations towards the body, Desjarlais pays close attention to the relationship between the "heartmind" (*sem)* and the "brain" (*lepa)*. Desjarlais defines the

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[8] Such notions of equilibrium derive from Tibetan medicine and possibly its connections to South Asian Ayurvedic traditions.

heartmind as "the locus of emotional needs and drive. Its function is to desire and want; personal volition emanates from the *sems*" (Desjarlais, 1992, p. 55). In dreams, daydreams, and other forms of imagining, the heartmind may leave the body and wander. The heartmind is the locus of personal knowledge and consciousness, while the brain (*lepa*) serves to regulate the desires of the heartmind. People strive to keep the heartmind pure and free from "pollution." When one loses control over the heartmind, madness can follow. The mad are known to wander alone though the forest, without thought or purpose while their hearts and minds drift away. The heartmind is no longer under control of the brain, and emotions, normally hidden, are shown without censorship.

Desjaralais' analysis of soul loss, his discussion of the concept of the heartmind, and its relationship to mental health and illness would soon become important references for scholar-practitioners working on the development of culturally sensitive psychosocial interventions in Nepal. Likewise, Desjarlais' work has been foundational in the development of a phenomenological approach to the study of lived experience in psychological anthropology (Desjarlais & Throop 2011). Although he was the first to bring phenomenology into conversation with the anthropology of Nepal, today scholars working in the Himalayas continue to engage this theoretical lens in their work on a range of topics from spirit affliction to the phenomenology of disaster (Poletti, 2018; Seale-Feldman, 2019; Seale-Feldman, 2020b).

Subjectivity, Identity, Agency

In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, scholars in psychological anthropology began to shift their attention from the study of emotion, mind, and experience to questions of identity, agency, and subjectivity. Unlike the earlier work on self and emotion, studies of subjectivity explore the ways in which the personal, experiential, emotional life of an individual is formed and reformed by shifting local and global economies, unstable political conditions, and ever-increasing situations of insecurity, marginality, violence, crisis and domination (Biehl, Good, & Kleinman, 2007; Del Vecchio Good et al., 2008; Ortner, 2005). This work entails a focus on everyday lived experience that examines the ways in which the psychological dimensions of people's

lives are linked to broader global forces of cultural transformation. In a break with the work that had come before, psychological anthropologists working in and on Nepal began to attend to the historical and sociopolitical dimensions of self-experience (Desjarlais, 2003; Skinner, Pach, & Holland 1998). Psychological anthropologists such as Debra Skinner, Dorothy Holland, Alfred Pach III, as well as Robert Desjarlais and Steven Parish turned their attention to the role of power, history, gender, and discourse in formations of self and subjectivity (Desjarlais, 2003; Holland & Skinner, 1995; Pach, 1990; Parish, 1996). An overarching aim of this work is to explore "how people–positioned by gender, ethnicity, caste, and locale, and constrained by powerfully compelling cultural words–nonetheless use cultural resources in creative ways to produce new self-understandings in response to changing material and social circumstances…" (Skinner, Holland, & Pach 1998, p. 13).

For example, while Desjarlais' *Body and Emotion* contributed a detailed study of the cultural shaping of body, emotion, and experience, his subsequent work, *Sensory Biographies,* turned to the study of the social and cultural shaping of perception and subjectivity (Desjarlais, 2003). Published in 2003, *Sensory Biographies* is a person-centered ethnography focused entirely on two people–an elderly Yolmo man and woman–and the sensorial, perceptual, political, and cultural dimensions of their lives. The following quote from the text is a concise summary of the importance of focusing on narratives of individual experience in anthropological research, a methodological and theoretical approach that has been closely associated with the field of psychological anthropology:

> Anthropologists should not limit themselves to the study of social or political formations alone; that culture and history are grounded in the lives of individuals; that the drift of narratives often proves to be more illuminating than sweeping statements; and that one can sometimes learn more by tending to particulars within the folds of the general (Desjarlais, 2003, p. 5).

In *Sensory Biographies,* Desjarlais traces connections between broader cultural forces and the formation of subjectivity. At the

methodological level, this means attending closely to narratives and the ways people talk about everyday lived experience. Here Desjarlais is particularly attuned to perception as it is differentially formed along gendered lines. For example, he writes that for the elderly man he calls Mheme, a lama who reads sacred Tibetan Buddhist texts, vision holds particular salience. As he puts it,

> Vision was a mode of sensation; by "seeing" or "looking" Mheme could apprehend the world. It was a means of knowledge; through certain uses of his eyes he could witness events, learn through watching, or see into the future. It entailed processes that contributed to the makings of a person; in seeing others and in being seen by them, certain forms of subjectivity were established (Desjarlais, 2003, p. 100).

Alternatively, for Kisang, the elderly (and illiterate) Yolmo woman with whom Desjarlais worked, he found that voice, as opposed to vision, held a significant position in her subjective experience. Kisang's actions, thoughts, and perceptions were often mediated or directed by the voices of others. By attending to the sensory dimensions of lived experience in the lives of a Yolmo man and woman, Desjarlais offers an approach that locates subjectivity in the cultural patterning of sensory perception and the language individuals use to narrate their lives and experiences.

From Psychological Anthropology to Global Mental Health

In the past two decades, the field of global mental health has rapidly expanded in Nepal (Seale-Feldman, 2020a). Central to this turn has been the work of American medical/psychological anthropologist and psychiatrist Brandon Kohrt, who began conducting research in Nepal in the late 1990s. Not only has Kohrt published extensively on a range of mental health issues in Nepal, he has also led applied global mental health interventions and research projects in collaboration with Nepali NGOs on topics ranging from mental health systems development to interventions that incorporate the latest Mental Health (mHealth) technologies to track well–being. While the majority of Kohrt's many

publications are geared towards the applied field of global mental health in Nepal, a number of key writings have been in close dialogue with the field of psychological anthropology (Kohrt & Mendenhall, 2016). Among these, Kohrt's collaborative work on somatization and comorbidity (Kohrt et al., 2005), mind-body relations (Kohrt & Harper 2008), and Nepali idioms of distress (Kohrt & Hruschka, 2010) have been particularly influential contributions that bring the earlier literature on culture, mind, emotion, and experience into the applied domain of global mental health with the aim of developing culturally sensitive psychosocial interventions that are grounded in Nepali "ethnopsychology."

In Kohrt and Harper's foundational 2008 article, "Navigating Diagnoses: Understanding Mind-Body Relations, Mental Health, and Stigma in Nepal" the authors explore the ethnopsychology of mind–body relations and show how they can be operationalized to promote psychosocial support and destigmatize mental illness (Kohrt & Harper, 2008). In this article, the authors draw on the literature in the psychological anthropology of Nepal and anthropological studies of shamanic healing alongside their own ethnographic fieldwork. The overarching focus of their work is how public health interventions can be informed by the affordances of local ethnopsychology to increase the acceptance of mental health services, such as psychosocial counseling.

Kohrt and Harper begin by outlining 5 aspects of self that are relevant to mental health, psychological wellbeing, and stigma in the Nepali language: 1) *man* (heartmind); 2) *dimaag* (brain); 3) *jiu* (physical body); 4) *saato* (spirit); and 5) *ijjat* (honor, social status). They argue that, like Western concepts of mind and body, Nepali ethnopsychology is also characterized by body-mind divisions, although of a different variety. Here they focus on the distinction between brain, *dimaag*, the site of rational thought, social norms, as well as madness, and heartmind, *man,* the site of desire, emotion, and feelings. They note that while an overactive *man,* heartmind, may cause physical and psychological suffering, such complaints are not stigmatized. Alternately, dysfunction of the *dimaag,* brain, is highly

stigmatized, as it is negatively associated with madness (*pagal*), the inability to obey social norms of behavior, and often leads to loss of *ijjat,* honor/status. Kohrt and Harper identify a space of opportunity in the pre-existing distinction between *dimaag* and *man* as coexisting, yet distinct, sites of mental distress.

Kohrt and Harper note that they are not the first to acknowledge the possible affordances of Nepali ethnopsychology for improving public mental health interventions, decreasing stigma, and increasing uptake of mental health services. In the 1990s, psychiatrists working with United Mission to Nepal, a Christian INGO, experimented with a novel way of promoting mental health treatment while destigmatizing mental illness. Acknowledging the stigma associated with the mental distress of the *dimaag* (brain), the organization introduced a new concept of affliction that they called *naasaako rog,* nerve disease. The symptoms of *naasaako rog* closely correlated with the Western diagnosis of depression, including experiences such as insomnia, loss of appetite, fatigue, loss of energy, nightmares, unexplained fear, anger, seeking isolation, and other "unpleasant feelings." Central to the invented concept of *naasaako rog* was the idea that distress was caused by a physical nerve disorder as opposed to psychological distress. Kohrt and Harper suggest that while UMN's attempts to destigmatize mental illness were well-intentioned, ultimately *naasaako rog* promoted increased reliance on pharmaceutical treatment and risked becoming a new form of stigmatization.

In contrast to *naasaako rog,* Kohrt and Harper suggest another way of promoting mental health care and destigmatizing mental illness in Nepal. Instead of emphasizing the (stigmatizing) role of *dimaag* in mental distress, their approach links the ethno psychological concept of *man,* heartmind to the approach of psychosocial counseling in humanitarian interventions. As they put it, "the redefinition of mental as psychosocial occurs through relocating pathological distress in the *man* rather than in the '*dimaag*" (Kohrt & Harper, 2008, p. 484). In this way, when psychosocial counselors are introduced as experts who listen to the worries held in the *man,* the heartmind, people are open

to receiving and participating in treatment as it is less likely to cause damage to *iijat.*

In Kohrt's work and legacy we find the impact of psychological anthropology on the applied field of global mental health. While not all interventions in Nepal have been equally influenced by his approach, those that have serve as an example of a mode of global health intervention that takes ethnopsychology seriously. One result of this work has been the popularization of culturally informed approaches in psychosocial counseling as opposed to the medicalization of distress or the "globalization of the American psyche" (Chase, 2021; Watters, 2010).

New Directions

Today we are witnessing the emergence of a new generation of anthropologists working on questions of mind, experience, and mental health in the Himalayas. Reflecting the changing therapeutic landscape of post-conflict and post-disaster Nepal, scholars working from both applied and critical perspectives have turned their attention to a new area of inquiry–global mental health, psychosocial interventions, and the expansion of psychiatry (Chase et al., 2018; Chase, 2021; Hagaman, Maharjan, & Kohrt 2016; Hagaman et al., 2018; Rai et al., 2018; Sapkota et al., 2014; Seale-Feldman & Upadhaya, 2015; Seale-Feldman, 2020b). My own research explores the biopolitics of global mental health and the management of psychic life before and after the 2015 earthquakes. As part of this work, I have conducted fieldwork on gender and psychosomatic disorders in Nepal with a focus on the problem of "mass conversion disorder," and the possibility of translation between indigenous and psychiatric worlds.

Across Nepal, groups of teenage girls succumb to a mysterious, collective affliction. Cases are generally reported in rural government schools, where episodes entail sudden, unexpected symptoms of screaming, crying, writhing, hair-pulling and loss of consciousness, which spread throughout a group like a viral contagion. Over the course of 2 years of fieldwork, I tracked transient cases of "mass hysteria" that had been reported in newspaper articles or mentioned in

conversation. I collected found footage, observed psychosocial interventions, and spent 6 months living in a rural village where a case had occurred. The phenomenology of affliction immediately presented unforeseen methodological and theoretical challenges–cases were transient and illusive–they appeared and disappeared; the affliction was de-centered from the individual–it was not a phenomenon bound within the mind of one person, but one that moved and transferred throughout a group; symptoms would arise in relation to spaces of death and their porous atmospheres of contagion.

The existence of psychosocial interventions for cases of "mass hysteria," sometimes referred to as "mass conversion disorder," is one result of the biopolitics of global mental health. Since the post-conflict period of the early 2000s, the management of mental health has become the focus of a range of donor-funded Nepali NGOs, who treat victim groups, draft policy, train counselors, and run "psychoeducation" programs to increase awareness about mental health and the psychosocial approach. In Nepal there is a politics to the conceptualization of "mass hysteria." Communities and girls resisted psychosocial interventions and the psychodynamic theories of "conversion disorder" that they employed. Instead, they insisted that somatic symptoms were not the embodiment of repressed trauma, unconscious desire, or gendered oppression, but were generated by the ghosts of those who died a bad death who transferred their suffering to the living.

Everything about cases of "mass hysteria" in Nepal seemed to implode the theories of subjectivity and somatization that I brought to the field. What kind of affliction was this, which is not bound within an individual mind, but moves and transfers across bodies, generations, and atmospheres? What kind of theoretical approach is possible when anthropological theories of somatization are not only embedded in psychosocial interventions, but actively contested by its subjects?

In response to ethnographic refusal (Ortner, 1995), I sought another path, one that experimented with a "symmetrical" approach to theory in psychological anthropology. In doing so, I treat indigenous concepts not as idioms or metaphors but as analytics in their own right

equivalent to Euro-American theory. Instead of drawing on theories of conversion disorder, which were contested by affected communities, I think with and from Nepali analytics of haunting, *bhut-pret lagyo* (Seale-Feldman, 2019). The concept of *bhut-pret* was used to refer to the ghosts of those who died a bad or unresolved death, particularly death by suicide or accident. Many such ghosts inhabited the locations where they died and were known to cause affliction among the living. When the living became afflicted, a shaman, *dhami,* would be called to discern the cause through rice divination or through *chinta basne,* a healing ritual in which the ghost causing the affliction would be identified by the *dhami* once he entered into trance. When the cause of affliction was discovered, offerings of the ghost's favorite worldly things–cigarettes, alcohol, sweets, cloth, jewelry, fruit, meat, eggs–were promised and later given to repair the situation.[9]

The concept of affliction implied by *bhut-pret lagyo* is distinct from that assumed by a theory of conversion disorder. Conversion disorder begins from a psychodynamic assumption that symptoms conceal a deeper meaning or hidden truth of the individual. This psychiatric diagnosis traces its roots to Freud's treatment of the 19th century hysteria, in which somatic symptoms were seen as an expression of unconscious and repressed desire that had been converted from mind to body. Through methods of hypnosis and later psychoanalysis, Freud's approach sought, in his words, to "translate into conscious ideas what was already known in the unconscious." This is precisely where Nepali analytics of haunting diverge in important ways. Instead of focusing on resistance, desire, and truth of the individual, we find that *bhut-pret lagyo* assumes affliction is relational. Symptoms reveal the suffering of others, and are transferred and shared across bodies, worlds, and generations. By thinking from Nepali analytics of haunting, I turned my attention to the relationality of

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[9] For an example of an analysis of medically unexplained epidemic illness in Nepal as involving somatoform symptoms caused by trauma, see (Van Ommeren et al., 2001).

affliction as it was transferred across networks of feminine friendship and solidarity.

To reconsider "mass hysteria" through a Nepali analytic of haunting is to explore new potentialities of thought. What if we treated Western psychiatric concepts and theories of affliction, such as "conversion disorder," as local (for psychiatric concepts also have a history, and are also generated from a specific location) and explored how they might be transformed by indigenous concepts of affliction, such as *bhut/pret laagyo*? The point would be not to approach Nepali concepts as ethnopsychology, but to allow indigenous analytics to transform universal models of mind. Research that engages a symmetrical approach to theory in this way opens itself to the possibility of thinking with and through Nepali language concepts as opposed to exploring them as a lens into the cultural shaping of mind and experience (Seale-Feldman 2022).

Conclusion: Nepal in Psychological Anthropology and Psychological Anthropology in Nepal

It is curious that while Nepal has become a key site in the global mental health movement due to the limited availability of mental health services, it has long served as an important location for anthropological research on culture and mental health (Chase et al., 2018). To a certain extent, it is as if these fields (global mental health and psychological anthropology) have been talking about two different places–one Nepal which lacks mental health care, and another which is home to a rich tradition of shamanic healing so powerful that it has survived in spite of efforts at eradication by decades of international health development programs (Pigg, 1996). The difference between these two perspectives hinges on the meaning of "mental health" as synonymous with psychiatry and a psychosocial approach. What would it mean to alter and expand a notion of public mental health in ways that could not only acknowledge but center the rich traditions of Ayurvedic and Tibetan medicine, as well as shamanic healing in the Himalayas?

A survey of psychological anthropology since the 1980s finds the place of Nepal prominently positioned in the literature on culture,

mind, self, emotion, experience, person-centered interviewing, phenomenological anthropology, subjectivity, and most recently, global mental health. Across this corpus, ethnographic research based in Nepal has driven important theoretical developments in the discipline of psychological anthropology, including popularizing the method of "person-centered interviewing," the phenomenological approach to ethnographic research and writing centered on understanding lived-experience, and the incorporation of anthropology into global mental health. In spite of the range of work on questions of psychic life in Nepal, historically this research has largely been conducted by and for American anthropologists. Yet as this volume attests, there are other histories of psychology in Nepal that can and must be centered in future anthropological work in the region.

Anthropologists studying questions of culture and mind in Nepal have returned again and again to key concepts and phenomena: the heartmind, *man*; the emotion of *laaj;* the experience of soul loss; forms of possession and techniques of shamanic healing. These unique concepts and phenomena have captivated generations of psychological anthropologists working in Nepal for the ways in which they challenge basic understandings of mind, emotion, self, and affliction in the tradition of Euro-American psychology. One outcome of this intellectual history has been the strong influence of an anthropological sensibility on the development of the field of global mental health and psychosocial interventions in Nepal. As such, to study global mental health in Nepal is also to explore the impact and legacy of psychological anthropology in the Himalayas.

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