

Interview with Prof. Dr. Shaifali Sandhya (Chicago)

**Culture, Delusions, and Social Reality:
Shaifali Sandhya on Intercultural Differences in the Formation and
Development of Delusional Beliefs**

InterCultural Philosophy: Dear Professor Sandhya, on a recent occasion you gave a talk in Bonn on the cultural shaping of delusions. Could you shortly explain first off what is defined as a delusion in terms of clinical psychology?

Professor Sandhya: A delusion is a false belief idiosyncratic to the individual that is unusual (but non-bizarre) in the context of the patient's culture, in this case both the US and Indian cultures, and the patient cannot be persuaded that the belief is incorrect, despite all evidence to the contrary or the weight of opinion of other trusted people. Delusions can be of various types, the two discussed here will be: jealousy and persecution. Delusions must be distinguished from overvalued ideas, which are beliefs that are socially shared or not clearly false but continue to be held despite lack of proof that they are correct, such as superiority of one's race or political party.

OK, there may be hallucinations of touch or smell within the patient's delusional experience but they take a backseat or they are specific to the delusion *and* they won't be prominent. Also, the patient will experience the delusion for at least a month before being given the diagnosis and other concerns will be ruled out, such as schizophrenia or substance-induced psychotic disorders.

InterCultural Philosophy: Your most recent findings on delusions, their connections to an individual's respective cultural background, and their influences

on cognition, sense, and sexuality are in part based on and connected to Anisha, a patient you have been treating in the course of the last year. What is her story in general?

Professor Sandhya: Anisha was born to a religious, pious, god-fearing and traditional family in southern India. She spent her early childhood in Bangalore, a large metropolitan city in south India. Anisha's mother is in her mid-60s and a home-maker, and her father, in his early 70s, holds a doctorate from IIT Madras, a premier educational institute. Anisha reports "good" relations with her sister and a "good" relationship to her parents. She is "very attached" to her mother and her father is her role model. The youngest of five girls, she was doted upon by her family and idealized her father.

When she was 21 years old, Anisha was introduced to Vasu by a family friend. At the time, Vasu had just gotten a job as an engineer in Chicago. For thousands of years, parents in India have arranged marriage for their children in India; Vasu had long understood too that when he married it would be to someone his parents had selected. He had come back to India for 30 days, determined to find his future bride during this period. He scoured the ubiquitous marriage sites, more than 1500 today and upon his parents' approval, for a suitable partner – one who is fair, educated, and docile, and eventually he provided Anisha's family with his marriage proposal. Following the proposal, his parents came for Anisha's viewing, a largely public meeting where the future bride is displayed to the groom's family and judged on all aspects – ranging from her mannerisms, hobbies, speech, docility to elders, and so forth. Following the meeting, he felt she would be a suitable bride, and they married within the month, in August 1996. Theirs was a

growing number of the new semi-arranged marriages. A few months later, in November 1996 Anisha arrived in the U.S. In the initial years of their marriage, she reports having a “normal sex life” and “normal married life.”

After two years of marriage, their fights started to erupt over excessive intrusion of her in-laws in their married life, their ongoing criticism of her behaviors and over Vasu’s financial assistance to his parents that was siphoning their savings. One day as arguments over financial help to his parents occurred, he started to hit her. The first instance of violence occurred when Anisha’s first child was still an infant. Anisha called the police who arrived, but since Vasu was remorseful and promised the violence would never occur again, she did not file any charges. But after this episode, Anisha began to feel overwhelmed with hopelessness, that “No matter what his family will do to me, he will always support them.” Mental breakdown of young Indian wives in the face of family stress is common in Indian families, and a form of psychotic breakdown is delusional disorder; such marital strife without the necessary support in a new culture may have initiated its start in Anisha.

Vasu’s absence contributed to Anisha’s heightening despair – and she started to believe he was having an affair with his female colleague. Soon, that thought morphed into the belief that her husband had not one affair but several affairs, including some with women he met on Craigslist. She cited as proof “messages exchanged with other females” but never alluding to the nature of the messages. When Vasu was scheduled to work on New Year’s Day, Anisha grew more suspicious as she was expecting him to be off work.

It seems like Anisha’s growing alienation, hopelessness, and distress fueled her vigilance to catch him red-handed in the act. For instance, she believed

erroneously that Vasu was using the job in another country in part as a cover for his affair. In order to find proof, she put together an elaborate plan: she hired a private investigator, installed a GPS tracker in his car, and tracked his online behavior. Her efforts did not result in any substantial results: the investigator reported only a large cash withdrawal coinciding with the colleague's birthday, at best an interesting correlation; the GPS tracker took her to the airport parking lot where Vasu had parked his car during his visit to Toronto and not a seedy motel she had presumably expected; the surveillance tools too, did not reveal any racy affairs. All of her tracking efforts to catch him red-handed did not bear fruit and Vasu continued to deny that he was having an affair, and began to accuse Anisha (not unjustly) of being obsessive and invasive... Being told that she was imagining the whole thing only made Anisha more desperate and distressed, and the vicious cycle continued.

Anisha's delusional ideation is unique in two different ways: once someone with a delusion accepts an idea based on one evidence rather than the other, they are less likely than a healthy person to give it up ("bias against disconfirmatory evidence"). There is also a suggestion of conflating several unremarkable pieces of observations – her husband's late nights at work and checking Craigslist – as one remarkable one: Philippa Garety and colleagues refer to it as a tendency to "jump to conclusions" and base their research on that hypothesis.¹

InterCultural Philosophy: Looking at the concrete contents of Anisha's delusions and the contexts and entities they are about, it appears that the content and

¹ See Garety, Philippa et al.: "Reasoning, emotions, and delusional conviction in psychosis", in: *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Vol. 114 (2005), No. 3, pp. 373-384.

nature of her false beliefs might be shaped by her upbringing in India – especially when it comes to sexuality – and current technological shifts. In what ways do her experiences and cultural imprints in sexuality and technology factor into the delusional viewpoint she is taking on her environment?

Professor Sandhya: In the post-Snowden world where leaked classified counterintelligence information was not only made possible through sophisticated digital tools but also revealed that espionage, and eavesdropping was done on millions of unsuspecting people by the National Security Agency in America, Germany, and countless other countries, Anisha's constructed unreality that her home is bugged is hardly far-fetched.

Furthermore, suspiciousness is not unique to Anisha. Ever wondered who is texting your partner late in the evening? Banal deception between couples is very much a fabric of intimate relationships. Recently researchers from the London School of Economics and Nottingham Trent University in their survey of a 1000 individuals with an average age of 49 years and married 19 years found that suspicious wives are twice as likely to spy as suspicious husbands. While suspicious wives will pore over text messages diligently, check the browser histories, and secretly read their husband's emails, check their Facebook accounts, and such textual and technological surveillance does not abate even after 19 years of marriage! Suspiciousness, it seems, is rife in close relationships, globally.

The cultural plasticity of technology in delusions was explored by Joel and Ian Gold by studying so-called "Truman Show delusions" in delusional patients.² Their

² See Gold, Joel/Gold, Ian: "The Truman Show delusion. Psychosis in the global village", in: *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry*, Vol. 17 (2012), No. 4, pp. 455-472.

work further confirms research which suggests that beliefs seem to be sensitive to technology,³ and the Internet.⁴ In *The Truman Show* from 1998, Truman Burbank played by Jim Carrey is adopted in utero by a television company and every moment in his life is being captured by the camera. His closest intimates are paid actors and his community is a simulated world; as its inauthenticity dawned on Truman, he escaped it. We often believe that a strong boundary separates the mentally ill from the mentally healthy but research by the Golds shows how mental illness is porous and permeable to our social contexts, and also pervasive. Culture or cultural processes act as a trigger that shape the way general psychopathology is going to be translated partially or completely into specific psychopathology.

InterCultural Philosophy: With regard to your monograph *Love will follow: Why the Indian Marriage is burning*,⁵ you have pointed out that the case of Anisha and Vasu also serves as an example for the general situation that while in most parts of the world, the first years of a marriage are perceived by men and women to be the “honeymoon phase”, in India’s culture the opposite is often the case. Can you elaborate on this and to what extent unfulfilled expectations and the strong wish to get out of an unsatisfactory marriage may also be relevant to Anisha’s delusions and the functional or useful role they can actually play for her?

Professor Sandhya: Conflicts can be resolved in mature, intermediate, immature or psychotic ways – and not necessarily on psychotic defenses alone, and in this, it

³ See Eytan, Ariel et al.: “Electronic Chips Implant: A New Culture-bound Syndrome?”, in: *Psychiatry. Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, Vol. 65 (2002), No. 1, pp. 72-74.

⁴ See Bell, Vaughan et al.: “Internet delusions’: a case series and theoretical integration”, in: *Psychopathology*, Vol. 38 (2005), No. 3, pp. 144-150.

⁵ See Sandhya, Shaifali: *Love Will Follow. Why the Indian Marriage is burning*. Noida: Random House India 2010.

is maladaptive to her.

Why doesn't Anisha have access to that part of the cultural norms that helps her deploy mature defenses? Anisha's struggling with her marital tensions has roots in cultural development and culturally formed ways of dealing with conflict. There are cultural underpinnings of conflict and adaptation: The myriad of *levels* of culture (economic, biological and interpersonal/emotional/affective) and the multi-determined *evolution* of culture in which the individual's needs influence culture just as culture influences the individual.

It's true that in modern India today, a domestic revolution is unfolding in Indian homes and divorces have exploded exponentially but divorce is not an option for religious communities such as Anisha's. For much of the history of Hindu marriage, divorce did not occur; when it did, it occurred in extraordinarily rare cases of a spouse's insanity, impotency, or adultery, or among the lowest of castes, and as a remedy for an ailing marriage, divorce was considered a fate worse than disease. Even though there are radical social changes occurring in the domestic revolution in Indian homes such as: later marriages, an increasing emphasis on education for girls, splintering of the extended family into nuclear households, increase in live-in relationships, greater awareness of how their own sexual pleasure might contribute to marital satisfaction, and a rise in pre-marital and extramarital affairs, divorced women face considerable social ostracism. In both India and the U.S., however, it is possible for husbands to philander using modern technology and it is justified and acceptable, especially in her religious conservative family, to abandon a cheating partner and to abandon an unhappy marriage.

Faced with the potential wrath and blame from her conservative family, her delusions have usefulness for her, as they align with the social understandings of her cultural heritage and buffer her from ostracism. Indeed, Vaillant, an expert in the adaptive processes of schizophrenia and defense mechanisms, writes that delusions are the most distorted forms of adaptation involving a break with external reality to suit the inner needs of the person. Seen from this lens of the symptom pool, Anisha's unconsciously latching onto her husband's behavior as an explanation for her behavior can be seen as one of the only avenues available to her. In pursuing her dogged belief of his philandering ways, she is taking troubling emotions and internal conflicts that might be indistinct or frustrating beyond expression and distilling them into a symptom or behavior that is a culturally recognized signal of suffering.

Her delusions might then be seen as altering the expression of her conflict and creating a parallel but profoundly distorted reality, but one that might serve five adaptive functions for Anisha: attenuate her intra-psychic conflict and buffer her from her growing despair, save face in her religious community when divorce occurs, maintain her perception of herself as a good mother and wife and preserve her self-esteem, create engagement with others, and enable her to abandon a dissatisfying and dead marriage.

InterCultural Philosophy: In your talk, you have also pointed out that due to the culturally informed nature of delusions, there are estimations on a significant amount of 'smaller' delusions within each society's population that simply do not become clinically relevant since they remain under a certain threshold of attention or bizarreness. Can you elaborate on these estimations and findings and what

typical examples of such often undiscovered or unregarded delusions there are?

Professor Sandhya: Delusions are flavored by local culture: patients in China believe that they are the chief disciple of the Buddha (Yip, 2003);⁶ Saudi sufferers of “turabosis” believe they are covered by sand;⁷ in West Bengal where humans may legally marry dogs, suffering from the delusion of being pregnant with puppies is a possibility.⁸ Similarly, technology plays a significant role in Anisha’s life and colors her delusion; on one hand, she believes she will find proof of her husband’s infidelity through installing spyware and on the other, she believes others are hacking her thoughts through spyware.

InterCultural Philosophy: In the discussion following your talk, it became clear that from an abstract viewpoint outside a respective culture, one could actually call large parts of its population delusional regarding certain aspects of public life or reality in general. Examples include e.g. the ancient Greeks’ belief in the pantheon or the conviction, widespread in medieval Europe, that there are witches. There might hence be a possibility to include empirical psychology’s findings on delusional beliefs and their connection to cultural standards into a more holistic theoretical analysis of the cultural and ideological undercurrents forming our perception and our concepts of the self, society and their relation to

⁶ See Yip, K.: “Traditional Chinese religious beliefs and superstitions in delusions and hallucinations of Chinese schizophrenic patients”, in: *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, Vol. 49 (2003), No. 2, pp. 97-111.

⁷ See Qureshi, N.A./Al-Habeeb, T.A./Al-Ghamdy, Y.S.: “Making psychiatric sense of sand: a case of delusional disorder in Saudi Arabia”, in: *Transcultural Psychiatry*, Vol. 41 (2004), No. 2, pp. 271-280.

⁸ See Chowdhury, A.N. et al.: “Puppy pregnancy in humans: a culture-bound disorder in rural West Bengal, India”, in: *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, Vol. 49 (2003), No. 3, pp. 35-42.

one another. Do you think that the theoretical and empirical work on delusions could contribute to such a critical theory of society, e.g. in terms of a critique of ideology? And if so, to what extent do you think that psychology would have to question and reevaluate itself again in the process, considering the fact that it is culturally formed as well?

Professor Sandhya: What are some critical issues in recognizing a delusion? Truth? Not really – because the truth changes across social groups and through history. Take the ancient Aztec conviction that the flow of human blood would keep the sun rising; their belief that their existence depended on tearing out the heart of another human being, and it cost 20,000 humans to be sacrificed each year or, the 25% of Americans who continue to believe that Obama is Muslim and from Kenya, or 48% of those who believe in UFOs, or 90% of those Americans who believe in the existence of God? And what of the German intellectuals like Nietzsche, Herder, and Wagner who pursued with much fascination and obsession Greek mythology?

Depending on the belief and time in history, a large proportion of society can be ideational – not sensate thinkers relying on Science. Delusions, then, are mental constructions so egocentric that they need a social following, some friends, and fabric to be believable or not. Judgments of madness, then, rely on whether someone believes in our story or not, otherwise we run the risk of our beliefs turning into delusions, our character reduced to insanity, and being like Anisha.

The interview was conducted by Jens Pier.

Further Reading:

- Bell, Vaughan et al.: "'Internet delusions': a case series and theoretical integration", in: *Psychopathology*, Vol. 38 (2005), No. 3, pp. 144-150.
- Chowdhury, A.N. et al.: "Puppy pregnancy in humans: a culture-bound disorder in rural West Bengal, India", in: *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, Vol. 49 (2003), No. 3, pp. 35-42.
- Eytan, Ariel et al.: "Electronic Chips Implant: A New Culture-bound Syndrome?", in: *Psychiatry. Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, Vol. 65 (2002), No. 1, pp. 72-74.
- Garety, Philippa et al.: "Reasoning, emotions, and delusional conviction in psychosis", in: *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Vol. 114 (2005), No. 3, pp. 373-384.
- Gold, Joel/Gold, Ian: "The Truman Show delusion. Psychosis in the global village", in: *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry*, Vol. 17 (2012), No. 4, pp. 455-472.
- Qureshi, N.A./Al-Habeeb, T.A./Al-Ghamdy, Y.S.: "Making psychiatric sense of sand: a case of delusional disorder in Saudi Arabia", in: *Transcultural Psychiatry*, Vol. 41 (2004), No. 2, pp. 271-280.
- Sandhya, Shaifali: *Love Will Follow. Why the Indian Marriage is burning*. Noida: Random House India 2010.
- Yip, K.: "Traditional Chinese religious beliefs and superstitions in delusions and hallucinations of Chinese schizophrenic patients", in: *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, Vol. 49 (2003), No. 2, pp. 97-111.

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