Review Paper

Mythological conceptualization, cognitive and ego development: Is there a correlation ?

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ABSTRACT

Background: In today's world there is a continuous struggle between science and spirituality, with a lot of doctors feeling that religion gets in the way of scientific treatment and sometimes also leads to very dire and dangerous consequences. While a lot of older concepts are invalid today, there is a reason why such concepts existed in the first place and they were also backed by some sort of logic and rationale. It is therefore essential to compare and correlate the older concepts with the newer ones since they shall also give an insight regarding the existing psychological concepts at that time.

Methodology: We studied and compared the various stages of ego development currently accepted mainly including Loevinger's and Piaget's stages of ego and cognitive development and correlated it with the Indian mythological concepts of Manas, Buddhi, Chitta and Ahamkara. They can also be correlated with certain concepts by Freud, Jung and Erikson. The sources of this information were various religious scriptures like the Vedas and the Bhagwad Gita and at the same time we have correlated it with various interpretations mentioned in encyclopaedias like Britannica and DK.

Result: While the study is our interpretation of the review of literature, we do realize that mythological concepts are very abstract due to the wide time span; and various writers and scripture producers and their interpretations are also very subjective. The clinical significance of this paper comprises of correlation of various symptoms with older concepts like disorders in *Manas* may mean perceptual disturbances or disturbances in *Buddhi* may translate to disturbances in executive functions.

Conclusion: While a lot of mental healthcare professionals do have a lot of scepticism in being open to the mythological concepts of human psychology, this paper emphasises that there was a certain observable and objective basis to these concepts exist, which can also be co-related with the modern-day concepts of psychology.

Keywords: Mythology, psychology, ego development, cognitive development.

INTRODUCTION

In today's world there is a continuous struggle between science and spirituality. While a lot of people feel that the modern theories of psychology differ widely from the conventional theories described in Indian mythology, a lot of meta-analytical studies done on this matter beg to differ. A study by C. Shamasundar,

in 2008 [1] found a lot of similarities between modern and mythological psychological concepts in the area of 'Attributes of mind' and 'Mind-Body relationships'. The study found that a lot of concepts overlap even though the terms and emotions used to describe these concepts differ in mythological and modern concepts. N. N. Wig [2] has discussed the 'Hanuman Complex' and how mythological stories can play a very important role in psychotherapy. The Hanuman complex also corelates with the archetypes described by Jung and how these archetypes, based on the mythological stories form a foundation of our conscious mind. These archetypes are shared by a population and have a very high therapeutic value due to their wide acceptance and socio-cultural following. Dr. Wig discussed how various complexes shape our personality and the choices we make. They also shape our behaviour at a conscious and a sub-conscious level [2]. Gorman Jr D in 2014 [3] revisited the popular TV show 'The power of Myth' and emphasised how mythology is a prime example of a well-written book having socio-cultural implications on a wide range of people. Avasthi and others [4] published a study on Indianization of psychiatry utilizing Indian mental concepts where they described the 'Tridosha' and 'Triguna' theory of Mental Health and described psychosis in context of Indian scriptures which closely resembled the word 'Unmad'. This paper also highlighted how certain concepts of the modern psychology correlate very strongly with mythology. In 2002, Lisa Cherrington's paper [5] on 'The use of Māori mythology in clinical settings: Training issues and needs' emphasised on the rising use of mythological stories and their use in psychotherapy. The paper highlighted various practices that the author practiced while training mental health professionals in using Māori mythic stories and the challenges she faced as well as its efficacy especially in the paediatric and adolescent population. The author highlighted the fact that mythological stories helped her build a better rapport with her patients and also helped a lot in explaining certain concepts since they were much more simplified in the mythological format. She also found that the receptivity of mythological stories to be much higher than direct advice amongst most of her patients. Fornaro and others [6] in their paper on 'Medicine and psychiatry in Western culture: Ancient Greek myths and modern prejudices' focused on the similarities of the prejudices and stigmas that existed towards doctors in ancient Greek and today's clinicians and also focused on how the use of psychopharmacology was rampant even in ancient Greece. In his paper 'Psychotherapy - Insights from Bhagavad Gita', Reddy emphasised on how Krishna (Therapist) used a single session, personal therapy approach with exposure to the stressor throughout the process and the ultimate metaphor of how a therapist travels with the patient through his stress, but cannot do the task himself. The paper also specifically highlights the flow of the therapy session which started with surrender to the therapist and continuous trust throughout the session (and its importance) and how there is also evidence suggesting the use of hypnotherapy ('Vishwaroopam') during the therapy session. The paper demonstrated that during the phase where Krishna shows the 'Vishwaroopam' to Arjuna, the subject is completely under the influence of the therapist and is highly suggestive after opening up all his vulnerabilities and insecurities [7].

Topographical model of Brain in terms of Hindu mythology compared with current Psychological terms

According to Hindu mythology, specifically the Vedas and the 'Patanjali Dhyana Yoga', the topographical model of the brain consists of four major aspects, Ahamkāra, Buddhi, Manas and Chitta.

According to Hindu mythology, Prakriti closest resembles the personality of the human being. It has various stages of development which can be correlated with Loevinger's stages of ego development [8]. The first stage of development comprises of development of Buddhi. Buddhi as per Indian mythology has two different meanings. The two closest translations are perception and intelligence. The theory of various stages of development of Prakriti seems to focus on the perceptual aspect of it. This aspect says that in the stage of Buddhi, the person becomes aware of the existence of the world outside of the self-i.e. the person becomes aware about the boundaries of self and the fact that the self is different from the environment. The intelligence aspect of Buddhi most closely resembles the cognition and executive functions as per current psychological concepts. The use of the term buddhi in various mythological scripts including the Vedas and the Bhagwad Gita translates to Buddhi making the aspect of the mind which reads the current situation, looks at the positives and negatives of it and eventually comes to an amicable decision. The Buddhi also seems to concern with the planning of the future course of action and time-management. The

concept of Buddhi can also be corelated with the sensorimotor stage of Piaget's stages of cognitive development during which a child has new experiences and new learnings and also starts to develop co-ordination of senses and begins to develop a motor response. This stage can also be correlated with the Trust vs Mistrust stage of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development of an individual where primary feelings of subject are through the mouth and perversion may lead to perceptual abnormalities i.e. Psychosis [9-16].

The second stage to develop is the Ahamkāra. Ahamkāra also can be interpreted in two ways. In the context of the stages of development, it most closely resembles the ego i.e. 'Self'. The stage of development of Ahamkāra comprises of the individual acknowledging the existence of himself or herself in the context of the world i.e. the first stage comprised of the identification of the outside reality, means beginning of the development of bodily and perceptual boundaries while the second stage comprises of the completion of this development, eventually leading to recognition of the fact that 'I' exist and the 'World exists' and where does one draw the line between the two. This is quite similar to the idea of ego-centricity described by Piaget in the Pre-Operational stage and by Loevinger in the impulsive phase. This is also in correlation with the Initiative vs Guilt stage of Erik Erikson's third stage of psychosocial development where with the use of the physical and mental resources, the subject attempts the virtue of 'Purpose' for the first time.

As deducible, the perceptual disturbances including depersonalisation and derealisation may occur secondary to a malformation or a perversion in these stages. The other meaning of the term Ahamkāra also just like ego is more of a dialectical interpretation. Just as ego is used in phrases like 'That person has become very egoistic', a similar use of the term Ahamkāra is seen in various Indian languages [9-14].

The further stages of development comprise of further elaboration of Ahamkāra, firstly into five elements of the universe. These five elements are earth (mud), water, fire, space and air. The further elaboration comprises of development of the five senses of perception i.e. smell, sight, touch, taste and sound. The final stage comprises of development of the organs of working in day to day life i.e. organs to speak, to move, to procreate, to grasp and eventually development of the mind i.e. Manas [9-14].

Manas also like the previous terms has two different interpretations. The first interpretation in context with the stages of development is that the Manas co-ordinates the five senses it obtains from the sense organs and deciphers it before presenting to the conscious. This can be co-related to various areas of the brain which are responsible for interpretations of stimuli from various sense organs. The other interpretation of the term means 'Will power' or 'Motivation'. If a person wants to quit a bad habit or start a new habit, he or she needs to have a strong Manas for the same. The idea of Manas is similar to the lines of the conformist stage described by Loevinger where in the super-ego develops for the first time. This can also be compared to the operational stages described by Piaget. The motivation aspect and will power aspect can also be correlated with the development of Super-Ego described by Freud and how once development of super-ego starts, the person starts looking at situations from different points of view and starts analysing the long-term consequences [9-17].

Finally Chitta, it has two interpretations. The first interpretation can be explained by a metaphor where Chitta is like a lake of consciousness in which the Ahamkāra, Buddhi and Manas exist and any disturbances in them shall lead to production of waves in the Chitta. Thus, as per modern concept, it most closely seems to resemble the consciousness. The other interpretation of the term deals with memory i.e. remembering and forgetting [9-14].

CONCLUSION

While the above explanations and correlations are our interpretations of the review of literature, we do realize that mythological concepts are very abstract due to the wide time span; and various writers and scripture producers and their interpretations are also very subjective. The clinical significance of this review shall comprise of correlation of various symptoms with older concepts like disorders in *Manas* may mean perceptual disturbances or disturbances in *Buddhi* may translate to disturbances in executive functions. So, in conclusion, while a lot of mental healthcare professionals do have a lot of scepticism in being open to the mythological concepts of human psychology, this paper highlights that there are certain observable and objective basis to these concepts exist which can also be co-related with the modern-day

concepts of psychology. The implication being that if these concepts are utilised in a creative way, they can be used to improve the acceptance of modern concepts and make them more palatable. In the current day and age, as we all know, Psychiatrists still face a lot of criticism from faith-healers and religious leaders, which leads to a lot of conflict amongst the normal people. This leads to development of an unnecessary sense of rivalry which in the real sense hampers the people's awareness and knowledge about mental health and makes it more difficult to break the stigma. Mythological concepts have a wide acceptance in a religious country like India and if used artistically, they have a lot of potential. They can be used to establish a stronger rapport with the patients, which adds to a lot of therapeutic value and also makes the explanation much simpler, lucid and palatable if done in mythological terms, using mythological stories. Plus, it also adds a sense of validation of the current concepts from the mythological concepts which would carry a lot of value to religious people. Eventually, mythological concepts can be used to break the stigma and add a lot of therapeutic value when used judiciously.

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