Challenging the West as the standard:
Students' views on the representation of cultural understandings of mental health in the psychology curriculum

Wahida Walibhai

Research Assistant

Manchester Institute of Education

Louisa Shirley

Senior Clinical Lecturer

Division of Psychology and Mental Health

Background

BSc Psychology curriculum

- Lack of representation in psychological research (Henrich et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2020).

- Psychology students of colour perceive their curricula as predominantly White (Gillborn et al., 2021).

- Only 3% authors on reading lists come from ethnic minority backgrounds (less than the number of White, male authors named John; Jankowski et al., 2022).

- Mental health teaching for at least two years.

Cultural influences on mental health (Hwang et al., 2008)

- Prevalence

- Causes

- Experience and expression

- Diagnosis and assessment

- Coping and help-seeking behaviours

- Interventions

Our study

Research questions

- How is mental health understood in the diverse cultures our students come from?
- How well are those views represented in the BSc Psychology curriculum at The University of Manchester?

Positionality

- Final year research project
- **Four undergraduate psychology students**- all self-identifying as coming from backgrounds that were not the majority on the psychology degree.
- **Supervisor**- White female clinical lecturer with interests in cross-cultural mental health and decolonising the curriculum.

Methodology

Participants

- 19 1st and 2nd year BSc Psychology students

- Self-identified as coming from a social or cultural background that was not the majority on the degree
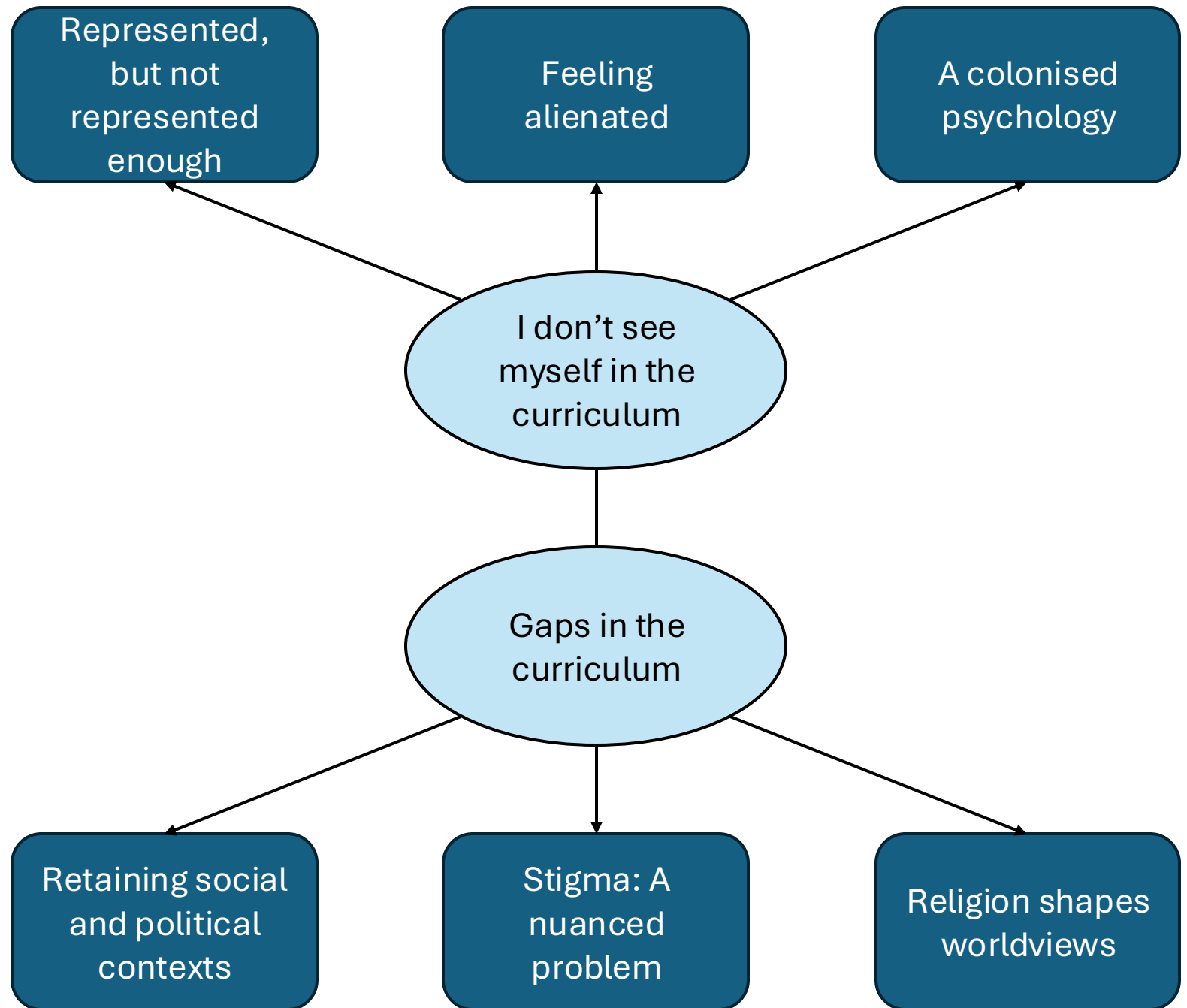
Data collection

- Qualitative semi-structured interviews over Zoom

Data analysis

- Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019)

- Initial coding by all student researchers; WW generated themes

Results

Represented, but not represented enough

Feeling alienated

A colonised psychology

I don't see myself in the curriculum

Gaps in the curriculum

Retaining social and political contexts

Stigma: A nuanced problem

Religion shapes worldviews

Theme one: I don't see myself in the curriculum

1.1 Represented, but not represented enough

"There['s] lots of international students in the school. Like lots. So I find it quite weird for them to like not be that inclusive in case of lecture material. When they're all about advocating for like international students and [...] acceptance." (Deb, Middle Eastern)

- Distinguished between diversity and inclusion

- Role of the curriculum in inclusion

1.2 Feeling alienated

"[It] kind of put me off psychology to be honest because I don't feel like psychology at the University of Manchester really reflects our experiences." (Ash, British South Asian)

"If you're from the UK, you might think something from a different culture is like abnormal. [A representative curriculum] would kind of like break that barrier down as well, like accepting other people's differences and cultures." (Amirah, South Asian background and Muslim)

- Curriculum constructs who belongs and who is 'other'.

Theme one: I don't see myself in the curriculum

1.3 A colonised psychology

"Obviously, most research, most ideologies within psychology are quite Western-focused. And I think as someone as a minority, I think I can identify things where they're like, is that generally applicable to someone like me? And sometimes it's not." (Annie, British South Asian)

- Curriculum reflects wider issues of representation in psychological research.

- Students challenge the universalisation of psychology.

Theme two: Gaps in the curriculum

2.1 Retaining social and political contexts

"[My country is] a society high in political pressure. [...] No freedom of speech and no right to condemn the government. [...] That's a stressor for people who [...] have different opinions from the government." (Liv, East Asian)

"There's a lot of trauma like within the generations, from war and like moving around." (Ariel, Central European and working class)

"People in my culture, they often do so much work, like too much excessive working. And then maybe the company or the teacher would expect more from them [...] so it caused what we call involution or rat race." (Lena, East Asian)

- Mental health viewed as caused or perpetuated by sociopolitical contexts, rather than individualised and decontextualised psychological processes.

Theme two: Gaps in the curriculum

2.2 Stigma: A Nuanced problem

"For instance, if you're diagnosed with bipolar, and you may be rejected from many occupational positions." (Liv, East Asian)

"I think the biggest difference is that [in the UK] they're more accepting and like they validate like people's like struggles with mental illness and mental health" (Nina, Southeast Asian)

"Because of a lot of other problems that people face over there, I think mental health kind of goes on like the back burner. It's not like people's top priority. Especially when people are like fighting to go to school and to obviously have full meals and things like this." (Amirah, South Asian background and Muslim)

- Widespread stigmatised attitudes towards mental health in many cultures; in contrast with perceived attitudes in the UK.

- Students explain how wider societal factors may contribute to stigma.

Theme two: Gaps in the curriculum

2.3 Religion shapes worldviews

"You're possessed by a devil in a way [...] or be like 'He did something wrong to be ill.' Or like someone cursed you in a way... they are, you know, they are ignoring the fact that how the person is actually feeling." (Jasmine, South Asian and Muslim)

"[When] addressing mental health issues in people who are religious, [...] you wouldn't approach them from [...] a Western standpoint [...] because they wouldn't respond to it. So I see what benefits it could have but at the same time it doesn't apply to everyone and it can have detrimental effects." (Jamal, Middle Eastern)

- Help-seeking through religious practices and people.

- Students thought religious solutions to mental health problems were unhelpful: they may blame the individual and undermine self-expression.

- Suggest that mental health support should be congruent with cultural understandings of mental health.

Conclusions

Students challenge the West as the standard

- 'Mirrors' and 'windows' in the curriculum (Healey & Stroman, 2021)

- Communicated complex, contextualised, and holistic understandings of mental health that are missing from the psychology curriculum

Recommendations

- Staff representation

- Incorporating role of religion

- Nuanced teaching on mental health stigma

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Psychology is all about humans. And so all of the humans. Not just the UK humans.
(Deb, Middle Eastern)

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