

Project Report

Psychological Aid for Undertrial Prisoners: A Community Outreach Project

Organized by

Department of Psychology
under the aegis of
Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies

Indraprastha College for Women
University of Delhi

In collaboration with
Delhi Prisons
and
International Bridges to Justice

July-November 2017

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, we would like to thank our Principal, Dr. Babli Moitra Saraf for providing all the support and resources required to carry out the Community Outreach Project at Tihar Jail under the aegis of Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies. She has constantly encouraged the faculty and students to undertake such initiatives and provided complete financial support to this project. We would also like to express our gratitude to Mr. Ajay Verma, Chairman, International Bridges to Justice, for initiating this project and coordinating with Delhi Prisons. It would not have been feasible to begin and complete this project without his constant availability, guidance and motivation. We would also like to thank all the faculty members who mentored the students. Last but not the least, we thank the students who worked voluntarily with great zeal and enthusiasm throughout the project.

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Introduction

The Department of Psychology, under the aegis of Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies, Indraprastha College for Women, organized a Community Outreach Project to provide psychological assistance to undertrial prisoners in Tihar Jail. The project was conducted at Jail No. 6, Tihar Jail, in collaboration with Delhi Prisons and International Bridges to Justice (IBJ). The project aimed at the application of psychological knowledge and skills by the students to enable the undertrials seek a fair and efficient representation in the legal process.

The Context: Rationale for the Project

India's criminal justice system is severely strained and is dealing with what is called as the "undertrial problem" – the high proportion of undertrials (people who have not yet been proven guilty of their alleged crimes) in the prison population. These undertrials are provided the services of a State lawyer through district legal aid cells but psychological counselling is not seen as a priority area.

Since the undertrials are often in a state of emotional turmoil and internal conflict and tend to be underexpressive, impassive and avoidant, psychological assistance can be an important first step in the socio-legal process. They often need not only legal but psychological aid, and the appointed lawyer may have little interest or expertise in the matter. This is where the skills and knowledge of a psychologist may be useful, helping the undertrials develop effective strategies to cope with their confinement, and to deal with the uncertainties of the entire legal process.

Objectives

The project was envisioned with an aim to provide psychological assistance to the undertrials and to sensitize students towards the needs of those grappling with the justice system. The specific objectives of the project were:

1. To document case histories of undertrials for their fair and efficient representation in the legal process
2. To undertake psychological assessment using interviews, tests, observations with the undertrials
3. To develop and implement psychosocial interventions for effective coping and management

Method

The project was proposed to the students of the Department of Psychology in May 2017 and a list of student volunteers was finalized in July. Although many students had interned in hospitals and other organizations previously, they had no exposure of doing psychological work with inmates in a prison environment. Keeping that in mind as well as the fact that the Indian justice system has been notoriously neglectful in the sphere of mental health, this initiative was taken with the hope that the students will get an opportunity to learn and expand their psychological repertoire. More importantly, it was envisioned that the students would help the undertrials by providing a listening ear and possibly bridge the communication gap between the inmates and their legal aid.

The project commenced on 24th July 2017 with an Orientation Programme for the students, held at the Department of Psychology, Indraprastha College for Women wherein the Chairperson, IBJ and Faculty Coordinators, Department of Psychology addressed the students. The orientation helped the students in understanding some basic legal procedures, rules and regulations associated with the prison.

A total of 33 students from the Department of Psychology volunteered for this project. These students were divided into five groups (groups of 4-9 students) and each group was assigned a specific ward at Jail No. 6 (Jail for female inmates), for their 2-hour sessions once a week for a period of 14 weeks (24th July to 11th November 2017).

Since prisons have tight security, the students had to undergo many security checks before actually reaching the wards and interacting with the inmates such as entries and checking identity cards at the gates, stamping the wrists, getting shoes and bags scanned etc. Sites of interaction were guarded by security personnel and special arrangements were made at the jail entrance for keeping the belongings of the students. Students were prohibited to carry any sharp object with them to the jail. They were also strictly advised against undertaking any activity suggested by the jail inmate outside the prison.

Procedure

Case study method was used to collect data and document the case histories of undertrial females residing in Jail no. 6 of Tihar Jail. The sites of interaction were ward 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 in Jail no. 6 of Tihar jail. An attempt was made to provide the inmates with a cathartic environment, where they could willingly express their concerns in a safe, non-judgmental space. While some undertrials required brief interaction, others went through an in-depth case study including mental

health screening. An informed consent was taken from the undertrials before the interview/ assessment and all were treated ethically according to APA guidelines.

Detailed Schedule

- Week 1: Interaction with Prison officials & IBJ representatives to understand protocols of prison visits and related guidelines
- Week 2: Introduction and ice breaking sessions with the prisoners
- Week 3: Rapport building
- Week 4: Client history
- Week 5: Psychological assessment
- Week 6: Psychological assessment
- Week 7: Sharing insights from the cases with other students, faculty coordinator and collaborators
- Week 8: Designing psychosocial interventions
- Week 9: Carrying out interventions
- Week 10: Preparing a case study
- Week 11: Writing the case study report
- Week 12: Carrying out interventions
- Week 13: Reflections from the project
- Week 14: Preparing Final Report

The list of students, mentors and faculty coordinators for the project is presented below:

Students

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|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Aditi Roy Choudhary | 12. Lakshita | 23. Sehrish Amjad |
| 2. Akshita Dung | 13. Lavanya Kaushal | 24. Sharanya |
| 3. Ankita Das Kashyap | 14. Nargis Ansari | 25. Shivani Verma |
| 4. Anmol Somani | 15. Neha Rai | 26. Shubhanshi Gupta |
| 5. Deepshikha Prasad | 16. Niru Sankhala | 27. Simran Kaur |
| 6. Drishti Jalan | 17. P. Upasana | 28. Sristi Bajoria |
| 7. Garima Chaturvedi | 18. Parul Tewari | 29. Sudarshana Bhattacharya |
| 8. Harsha Baid | 19. Poorva Parashar | 30. Swadha Puroshothaman |
| 9. Hemakshi Khadaria | 20. Pratiksha Thapar | 31. Tania Bir |
| 10. Hiranya Malik | 21. Rajlakshmi Das | 32. Tenzin Bhuti |
| 11. Jyoti Meena | 22. Renna Zehra | 33. Yashika Singh |

Mentors

1. Dr. Veena Gupta
2. Dr. Nidhi Malik
3. Dr. Surabhika Maheshwari
4. Dr. Mitu Rohatgi
5. Ms. Davis Yadav
6. Ms. Sumbul Abid
7. Ms. Surbhi Kumar

Faculty Coordinators

- Dr. Veena Gupta
Dr. Nidhi Malik

Overall Reflections

With a commitment to engage with the project for one semester, the interested students were apprised of the field realities by their seniors. But there was a general sense of apprehension in the group; as such an exposure was a completely novel experience for most of these students. As the students entered the field, these apprehensions were somewhat strengthened during the initial sessions as there was a sense of despair and resistance on the part of the inmates and a general sense of lack of purpose as most of the inmates required either immediate legal intervention or medical attention. However, with a background in a discipline found on the principles of humanism, and with their active listening and empathy skills, the students gradually built a relationship of trust with the inmates. Students' interactions with the inmates helped them to speak about their issues, and increased the awareness amongst the inmates about their rights so that no inmate is deprived of the justice she deserves.

During the course of the project, detailed case reports on the inmates' pre-prison conditions such as their criminal history, family relationships, job skills etc, their in-prison experiences and their immediate post-prison experiences were compiled by the students. They also identified cases that required immediate legal intervention and hence served as the bridge between the inmates and the legal system. The students also played an effective role in counseling the inmates, and helped them cope with their confinement and the uncertainties of the legal process.

The students and their respective mentors reported that they had a very enriching experience which helped them to expand and explore their counselling skills which was validated by the feedback given by the Chairperson, IBJ from time to time about the progress report of the inmates who were being helped by the students. The project further increased the students' awareness of the legal and judicial system in India, and how counselling and psychological assessments are carried out within these settings. They also learnt legal terminology and developed an understanding of the

various sections under Indian Penal Code. The students also gained a deeper understanding of the functioning of the prison in terms of the relationship between the prison staff and the inmates, and medical and other healthcare facilities provided at the prison.

On the whole, through this project, the students developed an enriched understanding of the prison environment and made meaningful positive contributions to the lives of prisoners. The project addressed both legal and psychological needs of the inmates, and helped them share their life stories in a safe and non-judgmental environment. Overcoming their apprehensions, barriers of language, limited counselling skills and inadequate knowledge of legal terms, the students made significant contributions to the project by being active and empathetic listeners and helping in compiling important case history data to aid legal intervention. Not only did the project made meaningful changes in the lives of the inmates, it helped students develop a more positive perspective towards life.

The Project concluded with a Valedictory session at Tihar Jail held on 22nd November 2017. Additional Inspector General, Sh. Raj Kumar; Deputy Inspector General, Sh. Shailendra Singh Parihar; Superintendent, Jail No. 6; Chairperson, International Bridges to Justice, Mr. Ajay Verma; and faculty members from the Department of Psychology along with the students attended the valedictory. The project was highly lauded by the prison authorities for the work done by the students in helping inmates deal with mental health issues, legal matters, dysfunctions in interpersonal relations, and other areas of concern. The role of psychologists in helping inmates cope with their immediate challenges, and in promoting their well-being, and resilience was reiterated. The high point of the valedictory session was the sharing of students' experiences and learning from their Tihar visits. Also very heart-warming was the emotional account shared by many of the Tihar inmates about how these students had positively impacted their lives in the jail. The bonds they had formed were visible in the tear filled goodbyes that were exchanged between the students and the inmates.



The entire team of students, faculty members and our collaborators after the Valedictory Session



Faculty members from the Department of Psychology, Dr. Surabhika Maheshwari and Dr. Mitu Rohatgi at the Valedictory Session



Mr. Ajay Verma, Chairman, IBJ addressing the gathering at the Valedictory Session



Students being felicitated by Additional Inspector General, Sh. Raj Kumar, and Deputy Inspector General, Sh. Shailendra Singh Parihar during the Valedictory Session held on 22nd November 2017