

“Distress, a Door to Happiness?”

The Meaning and Etiology of Everyday Adolescent Distress, in a Nepalese Government High School



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ACRONYMS

FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
EPH	Environment, population and Health
SLC	School Leaving Certificate
SMC	School Management Committee
ADB	Asian Development Bank
NGO	Non Governmental Organization

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory research aimed at understanding the *emic* perspectives of Nepali high school adolescent students on everyday distress. The study was informed by two theoretical frameworks, a meaning-centered symbolic anthropological approach and practice theory approach. Byron Good's (1998) concept of "semantic network" of illness experiences was used to bring out the meanings that these adolescents associated with their distress while Michel de Certeau's (1988) concept of tactics and strategies proved helpful to explore how adolescents used their agency to manage their distress.

The study was conducted with adolescents aged 13-18 years who were studying in a government high school in Nepal. Out of a total population of 111 adolescents, 30 were selected using cluster random sampling technique and five others volunteered to be research participants. The data were collected from six focus group discussions (FGDs) (three with boys and three with girls), 12 in-depth interviews (only with boys) and participant observation methods. The research instruments were pre-tested with Nepali adolescents living in the Netherlands and necessary modification was made. Adolescents in this study were approached as social actors. Prior to focus group discussions and interviews, verbal consent from the adolescents and their teachers was sought and a provision for counselors was made if necessary. During my fieldwork, no student needed counseling support, however, the school was introduced to a psychosocial organization for any future counseling needs of the adolescents. The collected data were checked and edited on the basis of relevancy and completeness and then divided into themes for analysis.

The findings suggest that adolescents experienced distress at all ecological levels: the individual, the family, peers, community and the school. One striking finding is that the geographies of distress not only included home, school and community, but also the geographies in between; that means the public spaces, the play ground, the forest and the road leading to school. Adolescents described four main *emic* theories of distress: poverty, discrimination, emotional suffering and existential meaning of distress. Distress was viewed both positively and negatively. Positive meanings of distress were related to the struggle for existence and accepting distress as a part of life, while negative meanings of distress were related to unbearable and unmanageable experiences in life that obstruct the growth of an individual in all aspects of his/her life.

The analysis clearly showed how distress both varied and was connected to several geographic settings. A distressful event in one setting triggered another distressful event,

either in the same setting or in another setting. For example, having an alcoholic father triggered domestic violence in the family and gave rise to bullying by friends and neighbors in the community. Being poor at home meant not having adequate educational materials or time to do homework; these circumstances at home triggered beating and intimidation by teachers and peers at school.

Despite the fact that girls were favored at school and boys at home, most causes and experiences of distress were quite similar for both genders. The social control was higher for girls than the boys, where as the workload, beatings or other distressful events were quite similar for both boys and girls. Compared to local children, the children of migrant parents were more fearful of changing school; they were not sure whether they would continue schooling next year or not. This insecurity gave the migrant children more distress than the local children. Family separation was another major issue for adolescent distress. Some students were staying at their maternal uncle's house, while others had a father abroad. So, anxiety and worries about parents and family members' health and wellbeing was high.

The findings suggest that to manage distress adolescents either opted for sharing with friends and mothers or wanted to keep quiet. Aside from silence, the adolescents used the strategy of diversion from distressful events and experiences. Adolescents watched television, listened to music, read a poem/story, practiced yoga or played sports to divert their attention away from distressful experiences. Some adolescents converted to Christianity to gain distance from discrimination of caste and ethnicity. It is important to note that none of the adolescents reported using negative coping mechanisms such as smoking, taking drugs or having sex. Another striking finding was that only a few adolescents went to their elders to seek help suggesting a significant generational gap.

CHAPTER I

Introduction and Background

Introduction

This chapter presents general information about the system of education in Nepal and provides the rationale for the research topic. It also presents the main objectives of the study and the major research questions. First, I present my personal interest in the selection of a topic and then I explain the significant reasons why the research in adolescent distress is a must. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

Background

My interest in this research topic is related to my own state of anger and frustration when I was at high school in a rural district of Nepal. During my high school days, many students including myself, experienced difficulties with the school environment, education system, the lack of textbooks and qualified teachers. Parental pressure for academic excellence on the one hand, and poor quality of education in government high schools on the other hand, were obvious sources of adolescent academic distress. Family poverty, domestic violence and social caste hierarchy were additional sources of distress. Due to this distress, many of my friends and their friends dropped out and did not finish high school; those who managed to continue also had difficulties passing the compulsory English subject. The standard of questions and grading systems, especially for the school leaving certificate (SLC) exam were the same as private schools which had all the necessary infrastructure, laboratory equipment and qualified teachers. Due to this unfair examination and grading system, many students from government schools fail the exam and some eventually commit suicide.

Fifteen years have passed since I graduated from my high school, but the situation and difficulties I experienced have not changed that much. The gap between the educations in a government school compared to a private school is increasing. In government schools, there is insufficient practical equipment for science laboratories and a lack of qualified English teachers, although students of these schools are assessed with the same final SLC exam as students in private schools that have adequate resources and qualified teachers.

The success rate of private schools for the SLC exam is 80% while it is only 20% for government schools (Vaux et al. 2006). Those government schools' students who succeeded in the SLC exam have to compete with students from private schools in higher education so the distress experienced at high school continues even in colleges and universities.

The education system of Nepal has primary, lower secondary and secondary level of education. After graduating by passing School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam at the end of grade 10, students enter a higher secondary level that is also known as intermediate or college level education. The systematic planning for education started with Nepal's Fourth Five-Year Plan (1970-1974). However, by 1990 the literacy rate was only 36% and less than 8% of the post-school age population had completed secondary education (Asian Development Bank 2004). From 1990 to 2008, there has been some progress such as an increase in the enrollment for Grade 1, now 36%; the net enrollment for secondary education was 21% and SLC exam pass rate reached 62% (Ministry of Education 2009). Despite some improvements, the quality and efficiency of secondary education are still poor and many public schools are poorly resourced due to a lack of text books, school infrastructure, the assessment system, education planning and mandatory teacher training (Asian Development Bank 2004).

The already sick educational system became more dysfunctional when a violent conflict started between the government of Nepal and the Nepal Communist Party (Maoists) in 1996. Even after the peace accord, in November 2006, there has been no substantial progress in the government education system in Nepal. The growing inequality in education systems forces students to leave school in a state of anger and frustration (Vaux et al 2006). In my previous work as a manager of a psychosocial NGO, I was involved in the development and implementation of psychosocial programs for high school students. My experiences showed that much needs to be done in the field of education and psychosocial wellbeing, especially for the adolescents in Nepal.

Statement of the problem

“Adolescence is best described as a transitional period in which individuals experience major physical, cognitive, and socio-affective changes” (Arnett 1999). Some adapt to these changes successfully and show no sign of distress whereas others experience adjustment problems (Dumont and Provost 1999). The emotional distress experienced during adolescence can produce tension between children's own lived experiences and societal expectations (McQueen and Henwood 2002). Besides developmental distress during adolescence, Nepalese adolescents experience distress associated with armed conflict, domestic violence, structural inequalities and chronic poverty. Nepalese adolescents, especially those going to government schools, come from poor and marginalized family backgrounds. Poor children more often live in neighborhoods that have less social capital with fewer supportive networks than their socio-economically better-off peers (Evans 2004). The chronic deprivation of basic needs,

insecurity due to structural violence and armed conflict pushes some poor adolescents to an extreme such that they feel no option other than committing suicide. Every year Nepalese media reports adolescent suicides because of failing the school leaving certificate examination (Kathmandu Post 2010). Nepali government statistics also show that the rate of “reported” suicide cases increased by 7.8 percent in the last two years and most of these were in the 13-30 age group (Kathmandu Post 2010).

In addition to reports of suicide, every year some government schools are closed for indefinite time because the school administration is not able to manage the effects of mass hysteria (The Himalayan Times 2010). The adolescents, especially girls, experiencing hysterical episodes, complain of abdominal pain and headache and show symptoms such as dizziness, hyperventilation, nausea and fainting. The stigma and feeling of shame associated with emotional distress and mental health problems is so high that many students suffering from these problems ultimately drop out from school. The school dropout rate in Nepal is very high; of 100 students entering in Grade 1 only 17 reach the Grade 9 (Ministry of Education Nepal). Only 40-60% of those who appear for School Leaving Certificate exam at the end of Grade 10 actually pass the exam (Suturois 2010). The SLC pass rate of government school is only 20% compared to the pass rate of private school which is 80%.

Mental health problems could be important contributors to school dropout rates, the low percentage of adolescents passing SLC exam and increased incidence of adolescence suicide in Nepal. To my knowledge not a single study in Nepal has attempted to study the relationship between adolescent distress and academic performance.

During the 10 years of the Maoist conflict in Nepal, many adolescents were forced to join the Maoist’s rebels for various reasons (poverty, peer pressure and abduction). They were mobilized by the Maoists to threaten government teachers with weapons and collect a monthly levy for the Maoists. After the peace agreement in 2006, the former child soldiers returned to the community and many of them have begun to attend school, but the lack of school support and community reintegration has been identified as major sources of distress for returning child soldiers (Kohrt et al. 2008). The study by Kohrt and colleagues (2008) further suggests “the mental health burden among former child soldiers ranged from 39% to 62% of participants depending on types of distress vs. 18% to 45% of children not conscripted by armed groups” (Kohrt et al. 2008:700). The presence of mental health problems among children who had never been part of a conflict gives an important message that other factors other than conflict are responsible for the distress of children and adolescents in Nepal.

Not a single study in Nepal has attempted to document adolescent's own understanding of distress, factors responsible for their distress and their ideas about how such distress can be managed. An anthropological study of the meaning of distress experiences from adolescents' points of view, and their coping mechanisms will help to design school curriculum and effective treatment and preventive interventions to minimize the numerous health risks associated with adolescent distress (Mehara et al 2002).

Research objectives, questions and sub-questions

This study's main objective is to identify how adolescents in government high schools in Nepal experience, understand and manage their distress. Also, by exploring adolescent's perspectives on their psychosocial needs this study hopes to provide more insight for the development of culturally appropriate psychosocial interventions for adolescents in post-conflict Nepal.

Research questions

The research is guided by four major questions and sub-questions were asked to substantiate the major questions.

1. Experiences of distress

- What sources of distress exist for adolescents at individual, family, school and community levels?
- How do adolescents express distress arising from these sources emotionally, behaviorally and socially?

2. Understanding of distress

- What are the causes adolescents attribute for their distress?
- What meaning do they give to their distress?

3. Ways of managing the distress

- What kinds of strategies do adolescents employ to manage their distress?
- What resources/infrastructure/ rituals/religious/leisure activities are available to adolescents to help address distress and maintain psychosocial wellbeing?
- Among the available resources which ones do adolescents make use of and why?

4. Unmet needs of the adolescents

- What are the unmet needs of adolescents in the school and community that could help reducing their distress related to behavioral, emotional, academic, and social problems?

- How can those needs be met in the school/community?

Conclusion

In this introductory chapter I provided an overview of the Nepalese public education system where the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam pass rate is low, the quality of the education is also poor mainly because of a lack of funds and opportunities for teachers to update their knowledge and skills. The gap between private and public school is significant. The children of rich parents, who are often in influential positions, go to private school so government schools are neglected by both the government and local elites. I also addressed the impact of Maoist conflict on the education system. Over 10 years (1996-2006) the armed conflict in Nepal heavily affected government schools because of rebel military activities and search operation by state security forces. As a result, many distressful events occurred and the school remained closed for several weeks, as teachers and students were occasionally threatened and abducted by the rebels and other times by the state security forces.

Finally, this chapter concludes that not a single study has attempted to understand adolescent distress in government schools in Nepal and argues for the need of ethnographic studies to understand adolescent distress.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Introduction

What position do adolescent children have in Nepalese society? Are they consulted, heard or respected for who they are? Do they exercise their agency; do they have means and opportunities to advance their life and career? What situations do they find distressing and how do they cope? So little is known about adolescents' everyday distress and their emotional and psychosocial wellbeing in Nepal. Keeping this in mind, in this chapter I examine 30 studies purposively selected from the readers of Amsterdam Master in Medical Anthropology course and articles obtained from an online search engine.

This review begins with an explanation of methods used to select the online articles before turning to the fuller discussion of the literature on adolescent distress. The discussion includes a summary of studies, key findings and use of key concepts, theoretical frameworks and methodologies of data collection. As the discussion progresses, it will become clear that research focusing on adolescent distress is scant, interventions designed from traditional survey methods have not been effective and adolescents are left with limited possibilities to access services when they are distressed. This is partly due to the methodological flaws, theoretical shortcomings and a lack of academic interest to understand adolescents as the creators of their own world.

The conclusion section, based on the discussion of the literature, provides evidence on the importance of the anthropology of children. The definition of "children" varies according to country and culture but most cultures define children as young human beings who are not yet an adult. In this study I use the term "children" to mean adolescents aged 13-18 years. Throughout the thesis the terms children, students and adolescents will be used interchangeably.

Methods employed for the literature review

The selection of articles for this review was done by searching the Anthrosource database, Google scholar, and readers of Amsterdam Masters in Medical Anthropology course. The online search was performed in February 2011 and was repeated twice in April 2011 and May 2011. The search terms were "adolescent distress in Nepal", "children and distress in Nepal", "idioms of distress Nepal", "child mental health Nepal".

The abstracts of studies resulting from this search were checked to determine if they included the study population (children/adolescents), made reference to child and adolescent mental health or local ways of expressing distress. Though I did not have strict inclusion and exclusion criteria, only English language publications were included for the practical reasons that Nepali language publications were not available online.

Since the search on Nepal resulted in only five studies related to my topic, I repeated the search with the terms “children and distress”, “child idioms of distress”, “adolescent distress”, “adolescent mental health” and “emotional distress of adolescents” within a timeframe from 2000 to 2010. This search resulted in 500 articles; thus, I narrowed my search to the last five years 2005 and 2010. This resulted in 100 studies and most relevant studies were purposively selected for review. A sample overview of some of the reviewed articles is given in Annex 1 and Annex 2.

Results

The literature search revealed that in Nepal there has not been a single ethnographic study on adolescent’s everyday distress. However, there are some studies Kohrt et al. (2008, 2010), Tol et al. (2010), Mahat and Scoloveno (2003) and Jordans et al. (2010) that examine the psychosocial and mental health status of Nepalese children, especially the child soldiers and children affected by armed conflict. Annex 1 provides an overview of studies conducted in Nepal.

Distress

Distress is defined as mental or physical strain caused by physical pain, livelihood difficulties, worries and anxieties. Distress also implies a notion of suffering (Woodgate and McClement 1998) and suffering is experienced differently; people do not suffer in the same way and with same intensity (Kleinman and Kleinman 1998).

The literature review identified a number of quantitative studies focused on child mental health. The studies evidence that both children in vulnerable situations and children normally considered not vulnerable showed a significant percentage of mental health problems. Kohrt and colleagues (2010) have compared the mental health status of former child soldiers and children never associated with armed forces. Their findings suggest that though both groups had similar anxiety symptoms, although, the child soldiers showed more severe mental health problems than non-child soldiers did.

For an adolescent, everyday activities or situations considered normal could equally be distressful. For example, Mahat and Scoloveno (2003) reported that some Nepalese adolescents feared medical injections or missing school classes as distressful. Now the question comes, if adolescents are experiencing distress from what is generally considered a normal situation such as missing classes, experiences of medical injections, mistreatment or bullying by peers or lack of attentions from parents and teachers, should we as researchers not look at those distressful situations? Don't these factors deserve to be studied? Is it not time for us to evaluate our own biases of only looking at distress in relation to traumatic events caused by social conflict and civil war? I strongly believe that it is a time to de-construct the post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) construct and stop over-emphasizing the role of traumatic events in the distress of Nepalese children. In doing so, the studies of Maes and Lievens (2003) and Hussain and colleagues (2008) can direct us to a new approach. Maes and Lievens (2003) studied the relationship between the characteristics of an individual and the risk and health behavior of the adolescents in Belgium. They found that only a few school structure and policy variables had an influence on the health and risk behavior of young people and they suggested a thorough examination be conducted of the paths by which schools can influence the health behavior of their students. Hussain and colleagues (2008) explored the relationship between the academic stress and adjustment among adolescents in public and government high schools in India (Hussain et al 2008). They found that though the magnitude of academic stress was higher in public schools compared to government schools, a significant relationship between academic stress and adjustment was found in both groups.

In Britain, researchers examined cultural concepts and language used by young men to voice their distress (McQueena, and Henwood 2002) and found that dominant British masculine identities, positions of power, privilege and marginality influenced the way adolescents voiced their distress. Is this the case with Nepalese adolescents? What are the local languages used by them to voice their distress? The current literature from Nepal is not in the position to answer this question. Similarly, there is no data to compare with the study of Eccles and colleagues (1993) who documented adolescent psychological distress as a result of mismatch between the needs of a developing adolescent and the opportunities available in social environment in their school. Their study also showed that adolescents don't want to be emotionally detached from their adults (parents and teachers); rather they desire a gradual increase in opportunities for self-determination and participation in decision-making. Is this the case in Nepal? Are there opportunities for adolescent self-determination and participation in decision-making? Unfortunately in many parts of the developing world, such as Nepal,

these opportunities are limited and adolescents are often confronted with socio-cultural changes. The greater the mismatch between the individual's need and societal opportunities, the greater is the risk for psychosocial distress (Eccles et al. 1993).

Adolescent children as social actors

An area largely overlooked in Nepal is the participation of children in research and intervention design. Though participation is a core principle in the UN Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC 1989), child participation in research is limited. Globally, there is a lack of anthropological literature on children's beliefs, values, and social behavior (Hardman 2001) and particularly in Nepal where the anthropology of children is virtually non-existent. This lacuna in the literature has been a barrier for understanding Nepali children as social actors in their own autonomous world.

Hirschfeld (2002:615) argues that "Children are not incompetent member's of adult society; rather they are competent members of their own society which has its own standard and its own culture". Hardman (2001) has similar arguments that children and adolescents reveal some portion of their society's beliefs, values and social inter-actions and therefore, they should be treated as independent informants within their autonomous socio-cultural world. But, the irony is that contrary to the idea of Hardman (2001) and Hirschfeld (2002), in many developing societies like Nepal, adults often take the role of gatekeepers (Hood et al. 1996:117) and speak on behalf of the children/adolescents excluding them from participating in the decision-making for matters related to their lives.

In agreement with Woodgate and McClement (1998:5), who argue that "like any other cultural groups, children have unique culture of their own with shared understanding of what it means to be distressed", I argue that a child-centered perspective is needed to understand how children experience distress, how they understand distressful episodes and how they manage their distress in a Nepalese socio-political context.

Methodologies used in distress research

Although a few studies, such as Akello et al. (2010) and Kohrt et al. (2010), have used mixed methods to examine adolescent distress, the topic is mainly dominated by quantitative methods. Kohrt and colleagues (2008) compared the mental health outcomes of child soldiers to those children who had never associated with the armed forces. Similarly, Jordan and colleagues (2010) looked at the effectiveness of classroom based psychosocial intervention by comparing with the treatment group and control group. Mahat and Scoloveno (2003) tested a

hypothesis related to adolescent fears during medical encounters. Some of these studies employed existing standardized measures/instruments to detect whether children with distressing episodes scored more than the cut-off score, while others have compared the distressed children with those of non-distressed children. One of the shortcomings in all the studies is that children are used as research objects answering questions in the situation of adult gate-keeping.

Expressing distress is difficult and respondents often are strategic and selective during the interview process (Buchbinder 2010). A greater understanding of how culture and context shape the expressions of physical and mental distress has practical, as well as theoretical implications. Moreover, the stigma and feeling of shame associated with mental distress cannot easily be understood or captured in demographic data; it needs engagement and time with the respondents to acquire the real state of their problem. The anthropological approach characterized by thick description, friendship and mutual respect serves this purpose and facilitates the data collection on sensitive themes. Hence, in this study, I argue for greater engagement of qualitative anthropological methods such as participant's observation, in-depth interviews, free listing, pile sorting and vignettes which are useful in exploring issues that are normally not spoken about in public.

Discussion

I discuss below a number of key issues; (a) methodologies of child research, (b) pros and cons of using standardized Western instruments in exploring children and adolescent distress and (c) the importance of ethnographic approach in understanding deep emotional feelings and social sufferings of Nepalese adolescents.

Child mental health research in Nepal has been mainly conducted with children affected by armed conflict. I argue that researchers and the funding organizations have overlooked the fact that exposure to extreme poverty and harsh livelihood conditions can be more traumatic than the exposure to the war (Tol et al. 2010). Since children who are not placed in vulnerable categories have a variety of socio-demographic profiles, the results of studies done with only children who fall in vulnerable categories cannot be generalized. Another important issue is that children from middle class family backgrounds are understudied in Nepal. These are the children who regularly go to government high schools, as they recognize the importance of education, but yet at the same time they cannot afford to pay the tuition fees for the private English-language schools. Hence, I argue that any study in

a school should not only focus on vulnerable children but also on middle class children who also suffer from social inequalities and caste hierarchies.

In my view, the quantitative methods are useful in the study of objective realities but when it comes to the subjectivities, they have big flaws. I think this gap can only be bridged with ethnographic methods allowing for children's changing emotions to be documented over time. With this approach, children are observed in their socio-cultural context and those not volunteering to be interviewed are also observed, their silence is documented and other participatory tools are used to follow up those who drop out from the interviews or treatment.

The qualitative studies reviewed for this chapter situated the experiences of distress within the socio-cultural context of the adolescents and analyzed their lived experiences at various ecological levels (Akello et al. 2010; Khort et al. 2010). This contrasts with most quantitative studies that test a hypothesis with the help of the standardized Western instruments, such as the Child Psychosocial Stress Screener (CPSS), Strength and Difficulty Questionnaire (SDQ) and measures of functional impairment (Kohrt et al. 2010; Jordans et al. 2010).

Literature has shown that translation of Western instruments into another language is not adequate to capture the depth of the questions to be answered (De Jong and Van Ommeren 2002). Another problem with the use of these standardized instruments is the issue of timing. Emotional distress is not static, but rather it is a process that changes according to the situation. Hence, it is important to note where the individual is at the emotional distress process and how these distresses have changed overtime and how the individual has managed their distress or if they have been overwhelmed. In this regard, the studies reviewed from Nepal have tried, but not fully succeeded, in addressing the issue of timing.

This literature review puts me in the position to support anthropologists like Hardman (2001) and Hirschfeld (2002) who argue that even the discipline of anthropology, recognized as describing "otherness" of other people's life, has neglected children, and ethnographic work to grasp children's perspectives is rare. In the case of Nepal, ethnographic work on adolescent distress is virtually non-existent. Therefore, I argue that an ethnographic research exploring the concept of child agency is needed to understand adolescent's perspectives on their day-to-day distress.

Conclusion

While there have been some efforts to study children's emotional distress, by and large, it can still be said that child mental health research is a neglected field in Nepal. The studies that exist are not free from methodological problems. The very problem is in the attitude of researchers and funders, who see distress as a medical condition, thus ignoring its socio-cultural aspects. Many distressed children from middle class families have been left unstudied because of an over-reliance on samples selected from vulnerable populations. Since researchers are more likely to get funding for conflict-related projects, we know more about the mental health status of children directly or indirectly affected by conflict than children who suffer from chronic poverty, family violence, livelihood difficulties and everyday distress.

The most important point I would like to make through this chapter is that children have been kept behind adult gate-keeping for so long and to understand their real lived experiences there is a need to see children as social actors in their own unique world. Until child-friendly theoretical perspectives are used and children are studied as research participants, the policies and interventions designed from adult perspectives will keep disappointing.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

A picnic day

It was Friday, the last day of the first week of my field work I was walking back home from school, as I was travelling through a dense forest and slippery road, I was also thinking how best I could have rapport with the students. I had spent the first week mostly observing the school, classrooms, interaction between teachers and students, communication patterns among teachers and among students. On the first day, I was introduced to students by teachers who said, “Students! Nawaraj Sir has come to do research in this school, try to help him as much as possible”. This formal introduction helped me to gain formal access to classrooms; I was invited to join the lecture sessions and other formal activities conducted inside the classroom. Students started addressing me as “Sir”. They would say, “Nawaraj Sir, so and so Sir is asking you to join the class, Nawaraj Sir where are you from? Nawaraj Sir we have leisure time now, you can come to our class.” I thought this “Sir business” (students addressing me as “Sir”) was going to be a problem; I could have real difficulties to build friendly rapport with them because now they would see me at the level of a teacher which would automatically create a kind of distance between us. I thought I have to do something to change this situation.

As I was closer to my home an idea of taking students to picnic came to mind. On Sunday, I shared this with the teachers and the principal, they agreed with the idea of taking students to picnic but were quite hesitant about my idea of not involving the teachers. I did not want to take the teachers to the picnic because their involvement would create a hierarchy and the environment would not be conducive for my aim of developing a good rapport with the students. I convinced the principal that I would take full responsibility of the students and would make sure no serious problem would occur.

On the picnic day, I asked some of the students to help me carry the food items, we left the school together and traveled about one hour to reach the picnic spot. My ethnographic observation started from the school. I was carefully observing every action of the students who were near me; I made sure that I spoke with everybody at least once and made occasional jokes or recited poems to help create a lively environment. I took pictures of the students and showed them; they also took pictures by themselves. During informal sharing many students asked me why I was doing research in their school, why I choose their school in particular. They addressed me as “Sir” but I repeatedly asked them not to address me as “Sir”, rather requested them to address me as Nawaraj Dai (Nawaraj big brother). In the beginning the

students felt uncomfortable, but by the end of the day they slowly started calling me Nawaraj Dai. The picnic time allowed me to mingle with the students, and I sang, danced and played with them. These activities were helpful in creating friendly atmosphere and ultimately for the sample selection. [*Excerpts from my field note: June 2011*]

Introduction

The above excerpt from my field note explains how informal data were collected and how respondents were approached in a more equal way. This chapter presents the research methods, theoretical framework, study population, sampling strategies, ethical considerations, and reflection on my role as a researcher. First, I talk about the theoretical approaches used in this research, namely the meaning-centered approach and the practice theory. I then address the study population, provide the rationale for the selection of research setting, and explain the sampling procedure and present respondent profiles. In the discussion section, I pose some of the dilemmas I went through and reflect on my role as a researcher, a teacher and a “big brother”.

Theoretical framework and concepts

This study uses two theoretical perspectives: the meaning-centered approach and the practice theory. One of the relevant approaches within interpretative anthropology is the “semantic network” of illness experiences proposed by Good (1998). He argues that meaning resides not merely in words but in the intentionality of the user of language, we can mean something different than what we say (Good 1998:76). Hence, a systematic clustering of related meaning items known as “semantic network” helps to understand the meaning of the symbols used by the individuals aside from the direct interpretation of individual symbols. This approach can be beneficial, specially to understand the disease etiology, in this case, the etiology of adolescent distress, but the semantic network approach too has limitations when it comes to the questions of what is in practice, do people practice what they tell or express in symbols? Is there a difference between what is expressed and what is practiced? If so, what are the reasons behind such differences; what makes it difficult to practice? These questions can be better answered by Practice Theory, which considers how an individual tries to exert agency while managing the structures with whom he or she is dealing. Since most of the interactions take place in a power hierarchy, and generally privileging adult teachers or parents, the critical medical anthropological approach of power, agency and structures are worth exploring.

Similarly, Michel de Certeau's (1988) concepts of tactics and strategies are relevant in my study. De Certeau defines strategy as "calculation/ or manipulation of power relationship that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power can be isolated" for the author, a tactic is "an art of the weak" (1988: 36). With the help of these concepts I explored how teachers who are often in powerful positions use their strategies to control children and how children, often in weaker positions, use their tactics to achieve short-term benefits from the school environment. Chapters four to six of this study answer many of the questions raised above. Based on the literature review, I used a combination of two theoretical approaches illustrated in the following diagram.

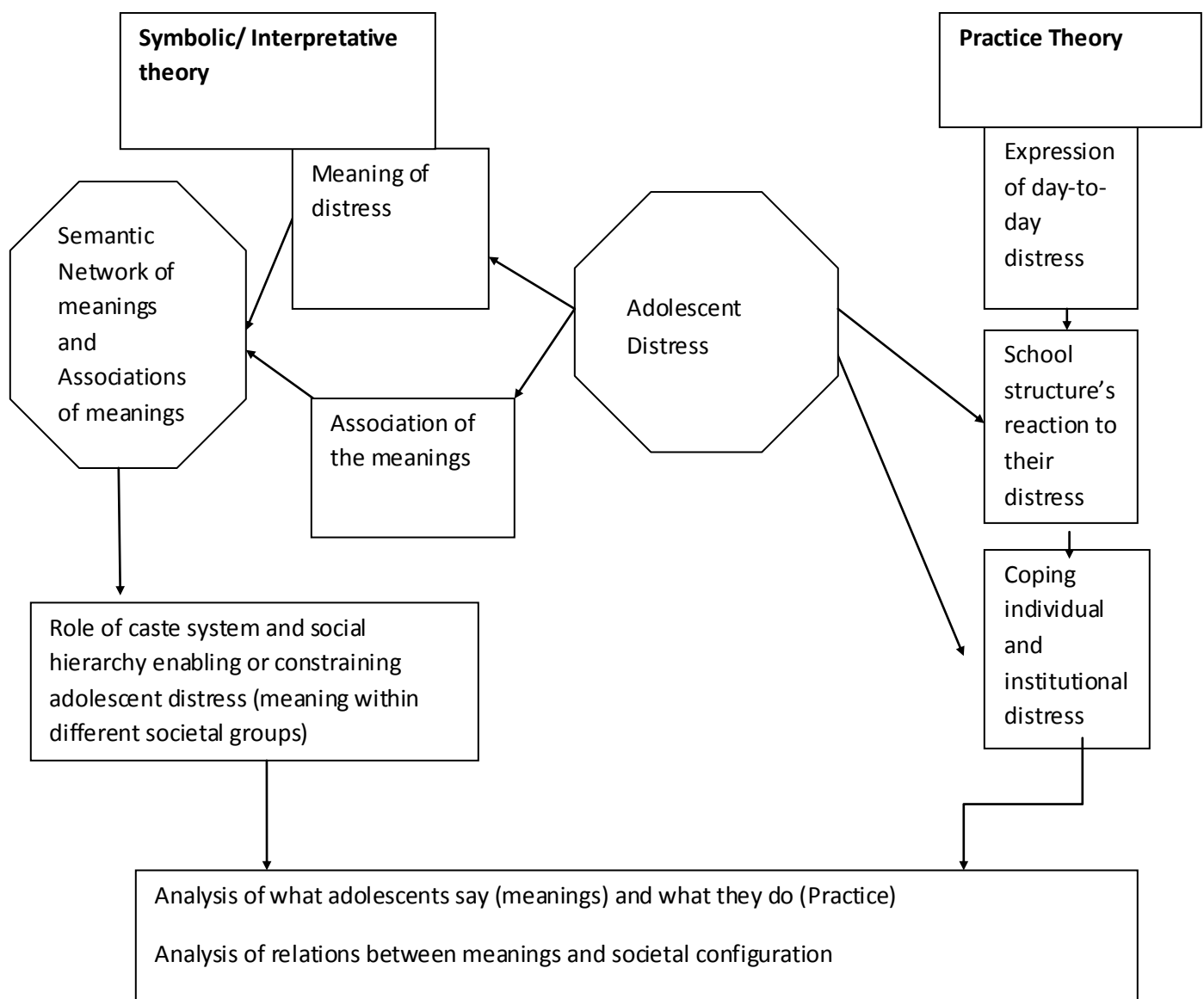


Figure 1. Theoretical frameworks

Concepts used in the research

The major concepts in my study are adolescent, distress, child agency and coping strategies.

Adolescents

In this study, by adolescents I mean students aged 13-18 years and studying at a government high school in Nepal. Throughout the research proposal I will use the words children, students and adolescents interchangeably.

Distress

By distress I mean the physical and psychological discomfort experienced by adolescents related to family problems, academic stress, peer relationship and mismatch between the adolescent's need and opportunities available at school, home and larger social environment. Nepali society is divided into various caste categories; the high caste is the privileged group while the lowest caste is the deprived group. I looked at the concept of caste and social hierarchy and its association with adolescent distress.

Child (Adolescent) agency

By child agency I mean the actions of the individual adolescents/children, their will, consciousness, intentionality and the ways they cope, negotiate or create space to challenge the school structure. The short-term tactics and long term strategies used by individuals for immediate or long-term benefits can be attributed to individual's agency. In the case of my research, I looked at how school structures (rules and regulations, norms and values, social caste hierarchy, peer group dynamics, power relationship with teachers) influence the adolescents to exert their agency in the form of short-term tactics or long-term strategies.

Coping strategies (management of distress)

By coping I mean the processes by which the adolescents manage adverse conditions (both internal family adversities and external societal problems) affecting their life. Coping strategies are the ways of managing social sufferings. Some coping strategies such as regular prayer, involvement in sports and self-help groups can be quite helpful while other strategies such as substance abuse, domestic violence and extreme isolation can be life threatening. The investigation of both positive and negative coping strategies of Nepalese adolescents is helpful for parents, teachers, education planners and policy makers.

Study location and social life

The study was conducted at a government high school in the Lalitpur district of central Nepal. High school, in Nepal, includes up to Grade ten. This school was purposively selected for feasibility and accessibility. However, this school is a true representative of government high schools in Nepal, as poorly resourced as any other high school in rural villages of Nepal with a high number of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The school is located in a hilly village at an elevation of about 5,000 feet and is surrounded by a dense forest rich in flora and fauna. The school is attended by the children from the surrounding villages. The students are mainly from Newar, Tamang, Brahmin, Chettri and Dalit caste groups and most of them practice the Hindu or Buddhist religions. A few students and their families have converted to Christianity. The socio-economic status of the students is very poor. Usually children of rich parents from the surrounding villages go to a private English-medium school because they can afford to pay the tuition fees and other educational costs. The students who come to this school are either children of the local farmers or migrant labors. Hence, besides studying they have heavy workload at home. Most of the students get up around 5:30 in the morning, do their household work, finish school homework and hurry up to go to the school.

The school environment is quite peaceful. Some of the students climb uphill to reach the school, while students from the village above the school walk down 30 minutes. The road to school is slippery during rainy seasons and dusty during the dry seasons. Since the road passes through dense forest, the children fear wild animals and people with bad intentions. Hence students generally walk in groups.



This group travelling is mostly fun for students, as they make jokes with their friends, and talk about their teachers, parents and friends. Usually, the sharing takes place during this uphill

and downhill walking. Some students, especially Grades 9 and 10 arrive at the school gate around 8:30 in the morning and attend the lectures by part-time teachers. When other students come to school, around 10 in the morning, all the students line up for morning exercise and prayers. For about 10 minutes, students do physical exercise and then a few students show their talent by singing songs, reciting poems or telling jokes. Next is a group prayer to the goddess *Saraswati* (goddess of education). When the prayer is finished, teachers start checking the nails and pocket towels of the students and those who have not cut the nails or those who don't have clean pocket towels are asked to stay behind. Those who pass this check are allowed to enter the classroom. During the entire fieldwork period it was really hot, students were sweating when they reached the school gate and immediately after that they had to line up in bright sunshine.

When students enter the classrooms with tin roofs they feel more humidity because of the heat from the tin roof and the large number of students in the narrow classrooms. The classrooms have fixed benches where 4-5 students sit squeezing each other. The walls have a few science posters and drawings made by the students. Each classroom has a white board. When teachers start lecturing the noise from one room disturbs others as room partitions are not properly constructed. As there is a lack of classrooms for all the grades, the students from the Nursery class are taught in a nearby house of a villager. A new construction for four rooms is underway, but teachers fear that the budget might not be enough to have a roof.

In the classes, the teachers generally use a lecture method to teach the students. Around 1:20 in the afternoon students get break for lunch. A lady shopkeeper brings food from her shop and sells it to the teachers and students. Many students bring lunch from their home and only buy chocolates from her. There is no formal canteen in the school. During lunch time, the teachers group together in a common room where one section is the office of the principal. The other section has a book rack, a kind of library, and on the north side of that room a bamboo rack is placed with some test tubes and chemicals with a sticker saying "science lab". Teachers eat lunch together; they discuss about current news from the newspapers, sometimes talking about the student problems and other managerial issues. This room is used for several purposes and people can be seen doing many activities at the same time. It's like a live theatre as some teachers are busy preparing their lesson plans, the principal is receiving his visitors, and some teachers are helping students. During the break, groups of male students or female students gather together and start informal discussions; sometimes teachers also join the groups. The students have mixed seating arrangement inside

the classroom; but outside I did not see mixed group of boys and girls, it was always either a boys group or a girls group.

The school has three taps for drinking water; the water supply is fairly regular. There are separate toilets for boys, girls and teachers. The teacher's toilet has a lock and the key is kept inside the multipurpose room. The toilet has water but not soap, so it smells quite badly.

The lunch break is for 40 minutes. Students eat lunch either outside the classroom or inside the classroom; there is no separate room for canteen. Some children play local games in school veranda after eating. The school does not have play ground for students to play. Once a year, during sports week, the teachers take students to the playground near the village and run a sports competition.

After lunch break students resume classes at 2 pm and finish at 4 pm. Then teachers and student walk to the villages in groups, sometimes students are together with the teachers while other times students walk separately, Often students want to have fun with their friends so they walk faster than the teachers. When students reach home the household work is waiting for them, they fetch water, prepare vegetables and some of them (specially the girls) prepare dinner and after everything is finished they start doing homework. Often there is a power cut (no electricity) in Nepal so students try to finish homework quickly by candlelight. Most of them go to bed around 10-11 pm and get up around 5:30 am in the morning.

Study design

From the literature review it is clear that quantitative studies with cross-sectional research designs have limitations in grasping the changing situation of adolescent distress. Furthermore most of these studies look children as purely research objects. This perspective in itself is a limitation in understanding children's subjectivities. I therefore, selected an exploratory study design using ethnographic approach and qualitative research methods to understand adolescent distress in Nepalese socio-political context.

Study population

All the students aged 13-18 years studying at the selected government high school were eligible for the study population. Since the school is attended by students from several castes (Newar, Brahmin, Chhetri and Dalits) and religions (Hindu, Buddhist and Christians) the sample represented a variety of castes and religions. The school has a total of 320 students and of this group 111 are within the age range of 13-18 years.

Sampling strategies

In the first week of fieldwork, I clustered the students in my sample based on their caste and ethnicity. I did this because I wanted to see the impact of caste on adolescent's distress as Nepali society has been divided in a caste hierarchy for centuries.

There were 46 students from Chhetri caste, 44 from Janajati caste, 19 from Dalit caste and 2 from Bahun caste. There were 53 girls and 58 boys. Four separate lists according to caste were made and each student was assigned a number in front of his/her name. Then the list (without names) was sent to an anonymous assessor and he was asked to select 12 students from Chhetri caste, 12 from Janajati caste, 5 from Dalit caste and 1 from Bahun caste. Out of 111 students I wanted a sample of 30 students for the FGDs. Hence, the selection of 30 students from several castes was based on the percentage represented. Because of the rapport during the picnic, five students, who were not selected through this sampling process, also showed interest to be research participants, so they were included making the total number of research participants 35.

Table 1. Demographic data of research participants

Variable	Values	(N=35)
Gender	Girls	20
	Boys	15
Age	13-15	12
	16-18	23
Caste	Dalit	6
	Chhetri	14
	Janajati	13
	Bahun	2
Religion	Hindu/Buddhists	32
	Christian	3

Note: N= Total number of research participants

Data collection techniques and tools

I used three qualitative methods of data collection. Participant observation was an ongoing activity, while in-depth interviews followed the first focus group discussion. Throughout the fieldwork, I used reflexivity to reflect on my role as a researcher.

Participant observation (an ethnographic thick description)

I spent considerable time with the students observing their day-to-day interactions with the situations that produce distress and how the adolescents make use of existing resources to reduce their distress. I observed peer communication, as well as interaction with teachers and senior students. I observed the students in both formal and informal settings. Formal settings included: the school classroom, the teacher's common room, school tap, school toilet and school veranda. Informal settings were a picnic spot, play ground and the road to school. Inside the classroom and in the school vicinity students presented themselves differently than during our picnic program, friendly foot match and visit to the historical sites. Seeing what students do instead of only listening to what they say was crucial because I often found contradictions. The observation of the contradictory activities helped me to ask cross-questions during FGDs and in-depth interview. The distressful events identified during classrooms were further explored by following the students who showed distressful behavior in the classroom. The picnic, football matches and travelling together to school really facilitated the data collection whereas I could make participant observation in a real life setting.

Focus group discussions (FGDs)

My original research plan was to focus only on the boys, because I feared I would not gain access to the girls in the short time frame of six weeks. But contrary to my fear, I was able to build a good rapport with the girls as well. So, the number of FGDs also increased. I was planning to conduct three FGDs with boys and one with teachers, but later I added three FGDs with the girls.

The 30 students selected from the cluster random sampling and five students who volunteered to be participants were included in the FGDs. The average size of the FGDs was 6-8 in all FGDs. Sometimes the same students participated twice because they could not go home alone when their friends were participating in FGDs. The FGDs were conducted to understand how knowledge about distress is constructed, understood and transmitted in social

interactions. During FGDs a free listing and pile sorting exercise was done to understand how the children ranked their problems related to distress. They were given two distinctly colored meta-cards and were asked to write down the common problems they had had within the last two weeks that gave them emotional distress. Once everybody listed their distress experiences, they were individually asked to rank them in a sequence as per the severity of distress (e.g. the most distressing problems first, followed by less distressing problems). After the individual ranking was finished they were asked to come together in a large group and rank the most distressing problems. The same process was applied for the strategies used to manage their distress. In one of the FGDs a vignette was used to investigate children's distress experiences and emotional suffering.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews

Since distress is experienced as a result of several distressful events it's important to understand the whole history of a distressful episode. Retrospective accounts of distressful events can only be done by interviews, which give insights into why and how the meanings, values and opinions are constructed, experienced and expressed. Keeping this in mind, I conducted 12 in-depth interviews with boys. Since I included girls in the latter half of my fieldwork an in-depth interview with them was not possible time-wise, so only FGDs were conducted with girls. For in-depth interviews I purposively selected the students who had shared distressful experiences during FGDs and informal tea chats with me. In the in-depth interviews, I had questions related to the students' daily routine from early in the morning when they get up till the evening before they go to bed. I also asked them about pleasant and unpleasant experiences in their past, because often individual suffering is associated with past life conditions. This helped me to better understand the current distress experienced by the adolescents.

Reliability and validity of data

To ensure greater validity and reliability of the data, several methods of data collection were used and information was triangulated. The research instruments were pre-tested with Nepalese adolescents in Amsterdam and based on the recommendation from the pre-test some questions were deleted while others were re-formulated to make them more child friendly. My focus on child-centered approach actually brought forward adolescent's emic theories of distress and gave voice to adolescent's experiences and needs.

Data Processing and Analysis

The collected data were checked and edited on the basis of relevancy and completeness. Qualitative data were analyzed by first transcribing and then categorizing based on themes to construct a semantic network of illness experiences. To that end, the texts, images and conversations corresponding to particular themes were placed on specific chart paper so meanings and their connections to the larger cultural values, beliefs and norms could be analyzed. Second, sections of the text related to adolescent distress were selected for discourse analysis.

Ethical considerations

Children were approached as social actors in this study and verbal consent was obtained before FGDs and in-depth interviews. Students' permission was sought before all recordings. At the start of FGDs or interviews, the participants were informed that if they wish to speak off the record, that was absolutely fine. During the entire fieldwork, the participants asked me to stop the recording only three times because they wanted to say something which they did not want recorded. Consent (verbal) from teachers was also sought because as per Nepalese law, children below 16 years of age are minors. As my research focus was in school, I did not directly get permission from parents, but they were informed by the teachers and adolescents themselves. Two psychosocial counselors were requested to be standby if any of the research participants needed counseling support, but during my fieldwork, no adolescent needed psychosocial support. That said, the school was introduced to the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization Nepal (TPO Nepal), a psychosocial NGO for future counseling support for the adolescents. To maintain anonymity and to assure confidentiality throughout this thesis the adolescents were given pseudonyms.

Reflection

During the six weeks of fieldwork I played five roles.

The researcher

The obvious role was the one of qualitative researcher, in which I performed participant observation, conducted in-depth interviews and facilitated FGDs. The role of a researcher was quite clear to me and also to the students and teachers, so there were few problems or ethical dilemmas. But in my other four roles I was more insecure and it was not easy to have

satisfactory answers. There were always situations of doubts, dilemmas and confusions. The four roles developed as the research progressed.

The student

In this role I attended many classes when teachers were teaching; I did exactly what other students did. I listened to the lectures and did the class work, when I could not answer the class work, I asked the students nearby to help me. I was good in Math, Science and English so I was able to do the class work and when students nearby me asked me to help, I helped them. This process helped me but it was quite unnatural for both the students and me. I was pretending to be a real student doing class work whereas neither the students nor I believed that I was a student. I felt quite uncomfortable in this role. My own experiences of studying in a poor government school as adolescent came to the surface, and at times I was carried away by my past difficult experiences. I must admit that there were lots of “shared subjectivities” between the students and me. I could easily relate my experiences to their current problems and this had influence on the data collection. Knowingly and unknowingly I shared my difficult high school life with them. To avoid possible bias because of “shared subjectivities” I tried to have *inter-subjectivity* as an analytical tool and to always reflect up on my role and its impact in the data collection process.

The class observer

In this role I observed how students interacted with each other during the class, how they related with teachers and what the communication patterns were between the teachers and the students. I noted some points down. This was a fairly straight-forward role, though at times my presence as an observer placed the teachers in a difficult position; they felt that they were being judged, tried to do extra work to impress me and asked for my feedback on their teaching. This was quite difficult for me because my aim was not to give them feedback, but they regarded me as senior to them and repeatedly asked me for feedback. Hence I ultimately gave them some feedback. As a researcher I don't know if it was a good thing to do or not.

The big brother (Nawaraj Dai)

In this role I participated in the activities with the students in more or less equal status. A big brother in a Nepali context is like a friend but he has the role of a protector or guide in difficult situations. So, during the picnic when students came up with problems or dilemmas, I tried to facilitate and solve their problems, suggesting ways to deal with their group dynamics.

This role started from the picnic and become more evident one week later when, not only the students, but also the teachers started addressing me as a big brother. It became a nickname for me. When I reflect back, I now think that the role of a “big brother” really brought me in contact with the students and enabled me to enter into their “culture of communication” Christensen (2004). I think this role also encouraged the female students to talk to me. The findings suggest that the role of a “big brother” strengthens the dialogue and communication between the adolescents and the researcher and also minimizes the hierarchical power-relations of researcher and the research participants. Hence I argue that the role of a “big brother” for a researcher in Nepali society helps to understand how “children engage with and respond to research” and allows the researcher to function as a “responsible adult” (Christensen 2004) without pretending to be a child during research.

A teacher

The real ethical dilemma came when I was formally requested by the principal to teach the classes for Environment, Population and Health subjects. I found it unethical to refuse the request, but was worried that the rapport I had built so far as a “big brother” would vanish and there would be confusion if I took the role of a teacher. I contacted my supervisor and accepted her suggestions. When she gave permission to teach the class, I agreed to the principal’s request, but I was not sure how I could best maintain my relationship with the students as a “big brother”. I looked to the existing culture that if the younger students have problems doing homework the elders generally have a duty to support the younger ones. In the first day of my formal class, I told to the students, “brothers and sisters, you don’t need to treat me as teacher I am still your big brother, I have just come to help you to study this subject because your subject teacher is on vacation; take me as a “big brother” helping with your study”. For a few days it was quite difficult but as I made the classes more interactive and introduced relevant games to explain the main theme of the subject, they began to like it and were more open thus treating me as a “big brother”. The advantage of this role was that I could put myself in the teacher’s shoes and experience the difficulties of teaching high school students. I worked hard for some classes and made them very interactive. For other classes, I just used the traditional lecture method, which was commonly used by the teachers. I saw quite a difference in the attitude and attention of the students when these two distinct methods were used. When I was using the traditional lecture method it was quite difficult to handle the students and I felt that in those circumstances I would have done exactly the same as the teachers are currently doing. The disadvantage of this role was that instead of writing my field

notes I was preparing for the lectures, which was time consuming and to be honest, the lessons that I was preparing did not have any direct relevance to my research topics.

When I reflect my participation in the picnic program, friendly football matches and historical sightseeing, I think these informal interactions were most valuable for interesting insights. I was able to observe that in the classroom boys and girls sat together and interacted with each other nicely, but in the picnic and historical sightseeing, the children segregated themselves by gender. The boys had one large group and three sub-groups at times and I saw severe disagreements between groups several times. The girls, on the other hand, were divided into five small groups. These informal interactions and observations helped me to verify already collected data and reach the core of the issues and problems I was studying.

Conclusion

This exploratory research used two theoretical frameworks namely a meaning-centered approach and practice theory. The study was conducted with adolescents aged 13-18 years and studying in a government high school in Nepal. Out of a total population of 111 adolescents, 30 were selected using cluster random sampling technique and five others volunteered to be research participants. The data were collected from six FGDs (three with boys and three with girls), 12 in-depth interviews (only with boys) and participant observation methods. The research instruments were pre-tested with Nepali adolescents living in the Netherlands and necessary modifications were made. Prior to FGDs and interviews, a verbal consent from the adolescents and their teachers was sought and a provision for counselors was made, but no student needed counseling support. It is notable, however, that the school now has been introduced to a psychosocial organization for any future counseling needs of the adolescents.

In this chapter I presented the study location and social life and reflected up on my five roles: a researcher, a student, an observer, a big brother and a teacher. I also presented the ethical dilemmas I went through and how I managed to address those dilemmas. I argued for the need of informal settings to build rapport with the adolescents

CHAPTER IV

Adolescents' Definition of Distress

Shyam's definition of distress

It was a sunny day and I was going to school on foot. I had already travelled half an hour in extremely humid weather, so I was sweating. As I started my uphill climb in the maize field, I heard Shyam shouting at me, "Nawaraj Dai (Nawaraj big brother), you are sweating, come and stay in the shade of the tree, I have water if you want to drink". I thought it was good idea so I went to him. I usually met him near this place and we would travel to school together. But, today I did not see him wearing his school dress, nor did he have a school bag. What he did have was a plastic bag of rice plants and an iron metal utensil to dig the paddy field. I asked him, "Where are you going? He replied to my question with a long answer:

Nawaraj Dai, I have lots of work in the field. I need to help my parents plant the rice, you know, the life of the poor student is always poor, you are poor at home, so you are poor in the community, you have poor academic performance at school and then you get poor job like Khalasi (bus conductor) and one's whole life becomes distressful because of this poverty. At times I feel it's not worth living, my whole body becomes restless; I feel something is obstructing my heart. When I remember the intimidation and humiliation by the neighbors, friends and teachers I feel deeply hurt, I cry a lot and at times I think of committing suicide. But, then I console myself thinking that distress and happiness are part of life, you just need to struggle and try to manage your distress properly, in fact, if distress is managed accurately on time, the happiness can sprout from that distress. I am living this life with the hope that this distress will lead to a brighter future.

Introduction

In this chapter, I aim to answer how distress is defined, given meaning and understood by the adolescents in a public high school setting in Nepal. The socio-cultural and economic aspects of the community also influence how distress is defined, given meaning and understood. Therefore, in the discussion section of this chapter I will analyze the socio-cultural and economic aspects and their role in the production of meaning of distress. Similarly I will reflect up on the meaning and its association with the help of a "semantic network of distress experiences". This chapter first presents the local vocabulary of distress used by the

adolescents in the context of a rural community and public school setting. The broader concept of *Dukha* (pain) is then explained in terms of livelihood difficulties, discrimination and intimidation to provide the understanding of pain and suffering in general. Next, an account of *manko Dukha* (emotional distress), its meaning and associations will be presented, followed by a theoretical debate on a meaning-centered approach. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main findings.

Local vocabulary of distress

In order to understand the widely used local vocabularies for distress, a free-listing exercise was conducted with the students in grade eight, nine and ten. The adolescents were asked to list all the vocabularies related to *dukha* (pain). The term *dukha* was used because its meaning in Nepalese society is broad and it is not a stigmatizing word . Anybody can use this term to explain both physical and mental difficulties. I did not want to ask the students directly about emotional distress because I was interested in how the adolescents define distress in their day-to-day life. In response to my question, “in your opinion what is *Dukha*?” the adolescents responded with the following words (see Table 2).

Table 2. Local vocabulary of distress

Local terms used for distress/distressful events
1. <i>Dukha</i> (pain)
2. <i>Manko Dukha</i> (pain in the heart/ emotional pain)
3. <i>Pir, chinta</i> (fear and anxiety)
4. <i>Kasta</i> (physical and mental difficulties)
5. <i>Pida</i> (deep emotional pain)
6. <i>Bechain</i> (restlessness)
7. <i>Manko ghau</i> (wounds of the heart)
8. <i>Manko bhawana</i> (feelings of the heart)
9. <i>Tanab</i> (tension)
10. <i>Aptharo mahasush</i> (feeling uncomfortable)
11. <i>Bhawana ma tesha pugnu</i> (deeply hurt in the feelings)
12. <i>Durbebahar</i> (mistreatment)
13. <i>Bhedbhav</i> (discrimination)
14. <i>Marka parnu</i> (unfair treatment)
15. <i>Aptahro paristhiti</i> (difficult circumstances)
16. <i>Khana launa napaunu</i> (not having enough food to eat and clothes to wear)
17. <i>Jiban ma aune samasya</i> (problems that come along with life)
18. <i>Naramilo ghatana</i> (unhappy event/ situation)
19. <i>Yatana</i> (torture)
20. <i>Attyachar</i> (extreme suppression)

Table 2 shows that the students described 11 Nepali terms for the experience of emotional distress, and nine terms for general stress. Although in the free-listing exercise, *dukha* was defined as a problem, an obstruction and bad luck, in the FGDs and interviews the adolescents also mentioned positive meanings for distress. It is interesting to note that all these terms are gender neutral. In all conversations not a single term was given to that would normally be used for male distress or female distress. The free-listing exercise and the analysis of FGDs and interviews with adolescents, aged 13-17 years, suggest several emic theories of adolescent's distress that are described below with the help of semantics networks of distress experiences. When the students were asked how they would define distress, they

came up with four specific ways to determine distress. The most common definition of distress was related to emotional distress but they also defined distress in terms of livelihood problems, discrimination/intimidation and had a philosophical explanation (see Figure 2).

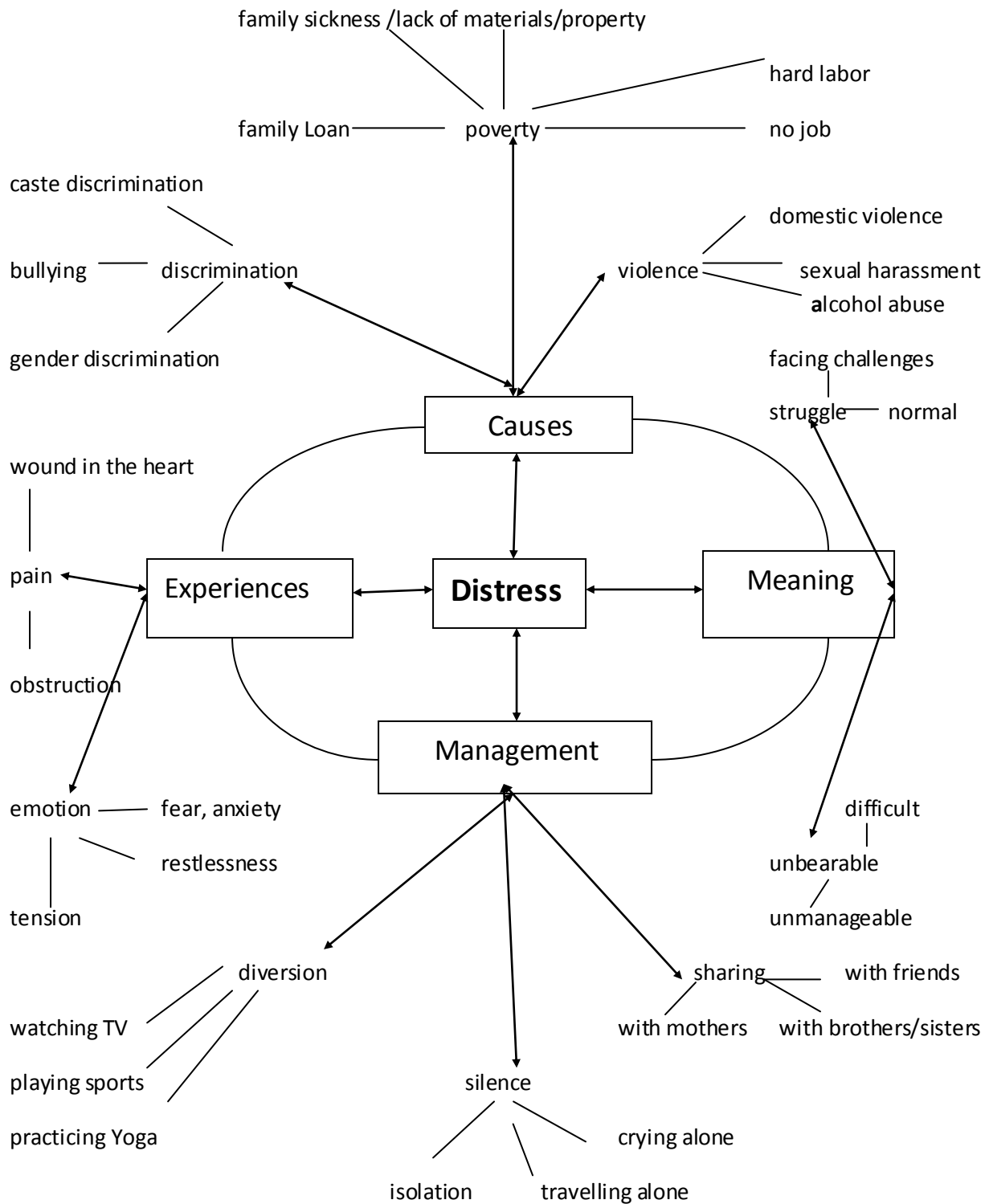


Figure 2: Semantic network of distress experiences

Emic theories of adolescent distress

The figure above illustrates adolescent's emic theories about the meanings, causes, experiences and management of distress. In this chapter, I focus on how the adolescents gave meaning to their distress. In chapters five and six, other emic theories are explained. In regard to meaning, for the adolescents to be distressed was to be poor, discriminated against, emotionally hurt or facing normal livelihood challenges with a hope for a brighter future ahead.

Livelihood difficulties (poverty)

While defining distress, the adolescents repeatedly mentioned poverty. Hence I start with how adolescents related distress with poverty. Poverty for them was not having enough food to eat, clothes to change or educational materials for the school. For example, Kamal (boy, age 15), defined distress as, "in my opinion distress means the problems of food, clothes and shelter. Distress also means the situation when you can't have food of your choice, clothes of your choice, and can't take care of your family members." Another adolescent, Hari, (boy, age 15) also gave similar remarks about distress and poverty. He said, "In my opinion distress means living hand to mouth, not being able to attend school regularly and not having anything in the name of property."

The observation of the houses and village environment also shows that the community is very poor. Most of the parents are farmers, and only a few members of the community have government jobs. The rest of the community depends on farm products, mainly maize. During the interview Reena (girl, age 16) said;

The main cause of distress is poverty, which creates many other causes for our distress. For example, we are poor at home so we don't get good looking clothes, pencils and exercise books and because of that the friends and teachers discriminate against us, sometimes we are sent out of the class, bullied based on our social and economic status and because of that poverty we are living with constant fear whether we will finish School Leaving Certificate (SLC) or not.

Discrimination/intimidation

Some adolescents define distress in terms of discrimination. Caste discrimination and gender discrimination is prevalent in the community where the school is situated. Shashi (boy, age 14) said, "in my opinion distress means cheating, many rich people and influential people cheat

the poor and the marginalized”. The adolescents expressed distress in terms of domination, hatred, as well as misbehavior and violence by the family, society and the state. The adolescents blamed the state’s discriminatory education policy for their distress. The adolescents linked distress with intentional humiliation, deprivation and discrimination. In the words of Sangam (boy, age 17);

Distress is the difficulties when community boycotts you on the basis of poverty and not being able to pay for the credit of things bought at the local grocery shops.

Distress arises when people intentionally pinch you and speak derogatory words to you; distress actually is the result of extreme suppression and inhumane behavior.

Both boys and girls defined distress in the form of discrimination based on caste, socio-economic status, level of education and their own status within their family. But contrary to the boys, the girls also felt discriminated against when family members or community members placed severe restrictions on their mobility as a prevention of sexual harassment. A part of gender discrimination in Nepalese society is that people talk more about a girl’s sexual behavior and take it more seriously than they do for a boy. So, parents often go to the extreme of controlling a girl’s mobility to avoid embarrassment caused by the sexual behavior of their daughters. The FGD excerpt from Sauravi (girl, age 15) illustrates this. She said;

Distress means the difficulties experienced in life and the misbehavior by other people to you. Distresses are of two types. Personal distress, which is related to the difficulties to feed oneself and continuously facing domestic violence and the societal distress, which is related to caste and class discrimination, backbiting, unnecessary gossiping and bullying.

Philosophical definition of distress (struggling with existential meanings)

Some adolescents defined distress as a positive thing, a necessity of life and the reality of the human world. They saw distress as struggle for improvement. One of the girls, Samjhana (age 16), said that “distress is the door to the brighter room” while Sambar (boy, age 16) said, “the distress is the element that takes you to your goal and gives you happiness”. Adolescents have taken distress as a natural teacher who teaches them to struggle, learn to manage life problems and search for happiness.

The adolescents take distress, life difficulties and happiness as a tributary of the river of life. They believe that without distress a happy situation is not possible; happiness comes

when distress is experienced and managed rightly. This is illustrated by the excerpts of the interview with Shankar (boy, age 13) who said;

Sukha Dukha yautai sikka ko duita pata huna (Distress [pain] and happiness are the two sides of the same coin). Distress, life difficulties and happiness are the three rivers which have to meet with each other to accomplish the goal of reaching to the ocean. So, why be unhappy when confronted with painful circumstances, you just need to struggle like rivers struggle to reach the destination and struggle teaches you how to live a life in a real sense.

The philosophy of distress in life is expressed differently. Some adolescents take it as normal phenomenon of life, while others take it as life problems created by individuals being too ambitious. The following excerpts from the FGD illustrate this point very nicely.

In my opinion distress is the début of human life. To live a life meaningfully you need distress more than happiness because distress is part of your life, which should be carried on till your death.

I feel that distress is part of everybody's life, from poor to the rich, and happiness does not come when you have not mastered on how to manage your distress. So, I take distress as normal phenomenon and try to deal with it as much as I can.

In my opinion distress is the problems in your life, which makes your life dark and miserable. If you are truly happy with what you have, distress disappears itself.

Emotional distress

When defining distress the adolescents used psychological and emotional terms. For most of them, the distress was deep emotional pain, hurt, misbehavior and hatred. Harihar (boy, age 14) defined distress as, “every painful situation such as deep emotional pain, deeply hurting situations and other problems related to one's life”, whereas for Sita (girl, age 15) “distress is that thing which unnecessarily gives pain, anxiety and violence.” Distress is experienced by adolescents as a bad event or a bad emotion that affects their growth in life. In the words of Rohan (boy, age 14), “Distress is a bad event which makes people sad and steals their hopes, interest and aspirations.”

The bad feeling or bad emotion is connected to how others relate to individual adolescents and behave with him/her in a social environment. Distress and difficult social circumstances

are found to be closely related because the adolescents believe that social problems give rise to physical and mental tension that later develops into distress. For example, Krishnamaya (girl, age 15) in an interview explained, “Distress means difficult situations where we don’t get helping hands, friends become enemies and relatives behave indifferently.”

A close link emerged from the data between emotional distress and expression related to *mana* (heart-mind). Adolescents often pointed at their hearts on their chest and minds on the side of their forehead to express emotional feeling and used the word *mana* to explain the impact of distress at the heart level (feeling) and mind level (thinking). In response to the questions, Rita (girl, age 13) elaborated on this.

Distress is that thing which negatively affects the mana (heart-mind), and the physical body. Distress also means having deep pain or obstruction in the heart-mind. You know, distress is that thing which unnecessarily gives pain, anxiety and violence. I see distress as obstructions to my positive efforts, the solution for which becomes difficult.

The concept of *mana* and its association with emotional distress is clear from the excerpts of the interview with Reena (girl, age 16). She said;

Distress is a bad emotion, physical and mental tension and bodily reaction to difficult times, all these things hurt people’s mana (heart-mind). Distress is also kind of problem or pain which is created by different reasons for example when expected result is not achieved from your work, when others behave you badly and when you are confronted with things that create anxiety.

Sangam (boy, age 17), in an interview, also mentioned *mana* (heart) and *manasik chinta* (worries and anxieties).

In my opinion distress is the state when your heart is restless, you have no confidence on yourself and your mind is full of worries, anxieties and tension.

Discussion

Some adolescents understood distress as a part of life, while others understood distress as an obstruction in life paths. Despite the differing perspectives on distress, all the adolescents agreed that the moment of experiencing distress is not a happy occasion. Distress is an unhappy thing/event, which occurs in everybody’s life sooner or later and makes you feel hopeless at times.

Table 2 shows that the distress terms do not have gender dimensions; all the terms can be used by both genders. This is striking in a society where gender discrimination is prevalent and women are accused of causing many misfortunes, but distress terms seem fairly neutral. Second, all these distress terms are morally neutral and there is no associated stigma. It is also striking that in a society where mental health problems are heavily stigmatized terms referring to the mental health status of individuals are stigma-free.

I suggest that the lack of separate distress terms for women and men and lack of stigmatizing words for mild levels of emotional distress are the reflection of the existing socio-economic conditions in which distress is generally shared and therefore a normal condition of life. Every member of Nepalese society is distressed in one way or another. From generation to generation the suppression of lower castes by upper castes and political hegemony of some elites over general public has generated widespread social suffering.

The concept of *dukha* (pain) in general and adolescents' broader meaning of *dukha* both refer to social suffering. The physical and mental pains caused by poverty, discrimination, restriction on mobility and structural violence reflect the collective social suffering of the adolescents. The approach to human suffering proposed by Kleinman and Kleinman (1998) has been helpful in this research. They argue that since the suffering and transcendence are central to day to day living of the survivors they deserve the self-conscious subject matter of ethnography. This means that as ethnographers we have to constantly reflect up on the puzzles of daily life and the context responsible for suffering. Similar to Kleinman and Kleinman (1998) I argue that to understand adolescents' collective suffering in Nepalese context they have to be understood within the Nepalese context of *Karma* and fatalism. *Karma* is the unalterable consequence of one's prior misdeeds (cf Bista 1991) and fatalism encourages the individual to accept problems with the belief that whatever comes to his or her life is already determined by his or her fate and the only thing he or she can do is struggle with the problems.

Adolescents related emotional distress with social and cultural conditions at school and in the home/community. These findings are in agreement with Good's semantic network of heart distress in Iran (1998:65): emotional distress is a dynamic product (resulting from individual's relationship to his or her social and cultural environment) perceived as a complex phenomenon that includes physical sensations and emotional distress. The semantic network of distress described above provides what Kleinman (1998) calls symbolic pathways of words, feelings, values, expectations and beliefs. The association of distress with livelihood problems points to widespread poverty and the poor resources at the school. The findings

suggest that there is direct relationship between distress and poverty. If a person is not able to manage his/her distress on time and if the same distress keeps appearing he/she will be looked down upon as an incapable person. The inability is related either to material poverty or intellectual poverty.

The definition of distress in the form of discrimination and intimidation reflects the structural violence, deprivation and marginalization in Nepalese society. Similarly I suggest that the philosophical definition (existential meaning of distress) is embedded in a belief system based up on the idea that everything is decided from the deeds of past lives and the best you can do is to accept and manage it.

This brings me to the point that the concept of *dukha* in Nepal has to be understood in the context of a particular conceptualization of the relationship between mind and body (Kohrt and Harper 2008). The adolescents repeatedly mentioned the relationship between on one hand *mana* (heart-mind; heart, the feeling part and the mind, the thinking part) and on the other hand their emotional distress. If they would have thought the distress would impact the (physical) brain level, stigmatizing words such as *pagal* (crazy) could have been expected. The findings suggest that for adolescents their distress is considered to be at the *mana* level. The implication is that they are not stigmatized as having mental health problems. Though this is an important discussion point for the distinction between the brain and mind and the mental illness I do not have enough room to go deep into this.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the local vocabulary offered by the adolescents in this study. The local terms for distress were gender neutral and stigma free. This can be understood as a sign that the levels of distress that are shared among adolescents in low quality government schools and coming from marginalized and deprived environments are not considered a mental health problem. I also presented the socio-cultural explanations of how distress is defined and understood in the Nepalese social context (in the next chapter I will discuss the causes and experiences of distress). The findings show that for adolescents, distress was either negative, such as to be poor, discriminated, marginalized, having family problems or it was a normal part of the life so that distress was as important as happiness. Distress has been defined as unbearable and unmanageable life experiences that obstruct the growth in life, blocking feelings, interest and aspirations. Distress was also taken positively in that by pain and distress individuals gain experiences and with the use of right experiences at the right time, distress could be converted into happiness. There were four distinct category of distress

definitions: 1) distress related to livelihood problems, 2) distress related to discrimination, intimidation or marginalization, 3) distress experienced and defined philosophically and 4) distress related to emotion.

CHAPTER V

Causes and Experiences of Distress

Teachers beat girls so softly thinking that their body is made up of bones and flesh but teachers beat the boys thinking that a boy's body is made up of stone and mud

- Chanchal, a 15-year-old student

Shiva's story

Shiva is a 14-year-old boy originally from a village on the outskirts of Kathmandu. He came to his maternal uncle's house when he was four years old as his own parents could not take care of him. Shiva's maternal grandparents have been taking care of him for the last ten years. Last year his grandfather became seriously sick and was hospitalized for almost a year. The family could not afford the cost of the treatment so they took out a loan from friends. Despite the efforts to keep him alive with loans, his grandfather died from cancer. Now the whole family is tense from losing the grandfather and not being able to repay the loan. The maternal uncle lost his job since the program he was working for was phased out. The family is facing severe problems; they struggle even to buy monthly food supplies. To reduce the family's costs the maternal uncle and aunt have asked Shiva to return to his parents' house. Shiva does not want to go back as he fears domestic violence and a lack of food. He said, "I don't want to go back because if I go back I can't study, my father is a drunkard, he does not do any work, my mother works hard as daily laborer and earns a living, it's not enough for the whole family so I don't have enough food to eat and I won't be able to continue my studies".

An encounter with Bimal

One morning on the way to school I met Bimal sitting in front of his garden. Usually at this time of the morning I'd meet him in front of his house and we'd travel to school together. I had seen him as a very organized person; his dress are generally well maintained, hair nicely combed and shoes polished. Today he was not organized, he had very rough dress, his hair looked dirty and he had on old slippers (*chappal*). Puzzled by his outfit I asked him why he was not ready for the school? He replied,

Yesterday I had a terrible day with the teacher. I was talking to my friends during his class so he beat me badly. It was not only me who made noise, other girls also made noise during his class but he did not punish them, I was the only one who got the punishment. It was unfair.

You know what he did, he shouted at me in front of my classmates and told me that he would take my skin out and spread salt and chilly on it (chhala kadera nun khursani haldinchhu) if I don't behave nicely. These verbal words were more painful than the physical beating. After that I was so fed up with him and with the school that I left home without asking permission from any teacher. My anger towards the teacher has not reduced even today so I don't want to go to school, even if I go, I will not understand the course because I am so hurt and fed up. I will go to school tomorrow when I am able to manage that ugly teacher.

Introduction

The above case studies illustrate what adolescents perceive as causes of their distress and how they experience distress at home, or in the community and school. In this chapter I focus on the etiology of adolescent's perceived distress and their experiences related to emotional distress. I compare and contrast the experiences of boys to those of girls. In the discussion section of this chapter I reflect upon the various aspects of explanatory models of distressed Nepalese adolescents with the help of the meanings of distress that were discussed in the previous chapter.

Perceived causes of adolescents' distress

The adolescents were quite clear on the causes of their distress. The list below (Table 3) was prepared after an in-depth analysis of all field data collected by FGDs, in-depth interviews, participant observation and informal conversations. As many as 24 perceived causes emerged.

Table 3. Perceived causes of adolescent distress

S.N.	Perceived Causes
1.	Physical punishment at home and school
2.	Indifferent behavior of friends, family members and teachers
3.	Discrimination at school, home and community
4.	Bullying at school and the community
5.	Load of school home work
6.	Work load at home
7.	Monotonous teaching styles at school
8.	Lack of implementation of school rules
9.	Sudden introduction of English curriculum at the school
10.	Lack of infrastructure at school and in the community
11.	Poor family economy
12.	Domestic violence in the family (due to alcohol or property)
13.	Substance abuse in the family and in the community
14.	Substance abuse in the family and in the community
15.	Poverty
16.	Fear of gossip, back-biting
17.	Fear of early marriage
18.	Teachers discriminate while giving numbers during the exam
19.	When teachers neglect student's needs, interest and desires
20.	Distress related with individual adolescents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extreme anxiety • Mental problems • Thinking too much • Anxiety • Tension • Deep mental pain • Physical handicap
21.	Distress related with friends/peers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When one's best friends believe others rather than believing you • When best friends say bad words, hurting words or pinching words • When friends behave badly • When best friends don't come to school • When friends get angry • When a relationship with friends become sour • Bad peer influence (bad company)
22.	Poor academic performance (receiving fewer marks in the exam)
23.	Travelling through dense forest, travelling uphill and downhill for a long time
24.	When somebody intervenes or interferes in our tasks

From the data it became clear that major causes of distress are related to teacher's discriminatory behavior, physical punishment by teachers and parents, humiliating behavior of friends, teachers, parents and elders in the society. Friends mean a great deal to the adolescents, so the hurting behaviors of best friends and bullying by peers are major causes of distress. The economic scarcity in one's family, excessive use of alcohol and subsequent domestic violence and family conflict were also identified by adolescents as causes of distress. Fear of backbiting, negative rumors about one's personal character or being married off before finishing the high school are some of the causes of distress particular for girls. For boys, a heavy work load on the farm, pressure to earn family income or fear of not finishing high school because of the economic conditions are the main causes of distress.

Geographies of distress

School, home and the community are the three places where adolescents experience distress. Experiences of distress at home and in the community are related to domestic violence, heavy workload in the family, lack of materials for the fulfillment of basic needs and disputes in the family or with neighbors because of the property issues. Discrimination, bullying and physical punishment and lack of infrastructure were common experiences of distress both at home and in the community and the school. The behavior and the teaching styles of teachers and the confusing rules and regulations at the schools were typical school-related experiences of distress.

The emic problem analysis model (see Figure 3) prepared after in-depth analysis of the field data also suggests three geographies of distress, where distress in one geographic setting triggers distress either in the same setting or in another setting. It also suggests that distress is not static and is not attached to a particular geography, but rather it is mobile affecting/or being affected by several geographies simultaneously. In the discussion section I will explain what I mean by mobility of distress.

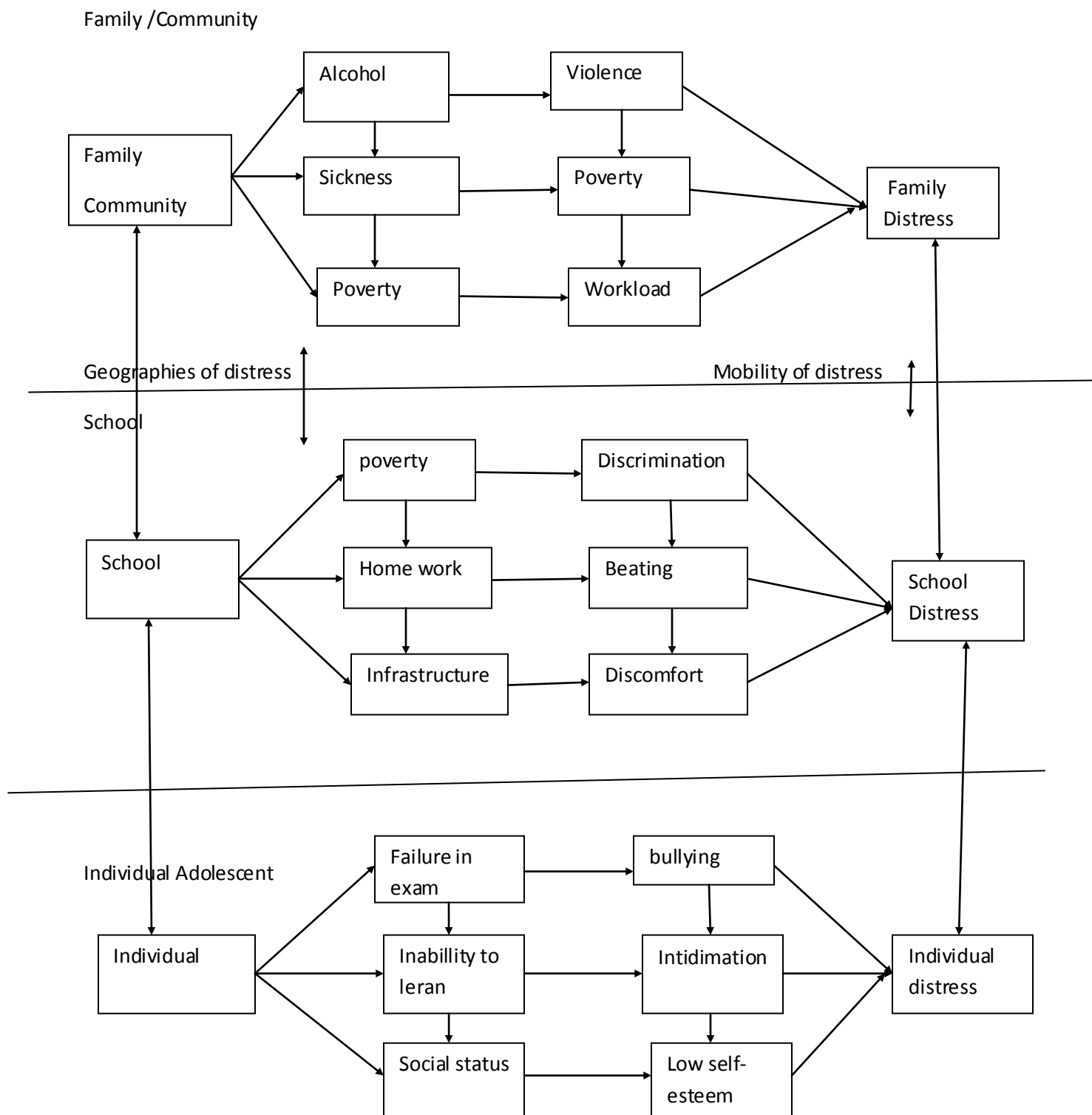


Figure 3. Emic problem analysis model

Experiences of distress at home

At home the adolescents have experienced distress due to family poverty, family loan, substance abuse, domestic violence and unfriendly behavior of parents.

Domestic violence

From the data, domestic violence emerges as the main cause of distress for adolescents at home. The family harmony is disturbed either because of alcohol use or because of a problem related to lack of materials/ property. The beating of mothers and children by fathers is a common phenomenon in the community. Shiva (boy, age 14) during the interview said;

My father beats my mother so badly every time he comes to home after work. The beating became so bad that my mother could no longer take care of the children so I was sent to my maternal uncle's house. I have been staying at the maternal uncle's house for the last ten years and in that time period I have seen my father quite a number of times but he has not bought anything for me, because of alcohol his conscience has almost gone, he does not take care of his own son.

In Nepalese society, the father is an authority figure, when he is ashamed or insulted by his friends, co-workers or neighbors with whom he cannot argue back, he brings his anger in the family and projects it by beating his wife and children. Supriya (girl, age 14) said;

My father had a big dispute at his office therefore he had to leave the job; he now pours his office anger to me, my sister and my mother. He is no longer taking care of us; instead my mother is taking care of him, I mean feeding him from the earnings she makes from daily labor work”.

Poverty is another cause of domestic violence in the community. The market prices of basic commodities are so high that the family's earnings are rarely enough to fulfill the basic food supplies and clothing for the family. When somebody in the family becomes sick, the family either has to get a loan or sell land for the treatment. The condition of a family with a chronically ill family member is devastating, almost daily there are small to large scale disputes, mainly because of the lack of money for treatment, or the necessity to repay a loan. Kundan (boy, age 17) elaborated on this;

In my family because my mother is chronically sick, the money is always needed for her medication. We sometimes have to take out a loan for emergencies. When the loan lenders pressure the family to repay the loan, the family disputes and violence increases, my mother is already mad because of sickness and my father becomes mad because of the loan and the whole house becomes like a war zone and we go to our relative's house for a day or two to escape the violence.

Substance abuse

Substance abuse, particularly the use of locally made alcohol, has been identified by adolescents as a cause of distress. Many adolescents have experienced distress because of domestic violence triggered by the consumption of alcohol. The use of homemade alcohol is common especially in *Tamang* families where its use is culturally accepted and almost every family member drinks alcohol, but generally only fathers often drink excessively. Basanti (girl, age 15) shared;

My mother, grandmother and the father all used to drink, now after having jaundice grandmother has stopped drinking, mother also stopped once she converted into Christianity but my father is still drinking.

The availability of alcohol in the village and excessive drinking by fathers brought so many social problems, such as fights, unnecessary disputes, domestic violence, poverty and unemployment. One of the *Tamang* boys in the FGD said, “My father takes alcohol and makes disputes with my mother and other family members, his behavior disturbs my studies”. Because many children and women faced unbearable problems because of the substance abuse, the Village Improvement Committee (a group of village elite and youths) decided to ban the selling of the alcohol in public tea-shops but its use in individual houses was not banned because of its cultural significance for *Tamang* families.

Parent's behavior and family environment

Generally parents want their children to be educated, but they don't understand the extent of the hard work involved for their children and the amount of educational materials children need in order to excel in their exams. There is a vast gap between parents' understanding of education and children's real educational needs. The following excerpts of a FGD with boys from grade eight and nine sheds light on this fact.

Parents don't understand our need for educational materials. When we ask money for pens and exercise books parents don't listen, even if they listen they try to delay. Because of these behaviors of parents we are in a problem at school when teachers ask for the right notebook for homework.

My parents beat me blaming that I asked them for money to buy pens and exercise books in front of other villagers.

My parents give me some pens and ask me to manage them for one year, when pens get finished before one year they scold and beat.

When the farming season or festival season come, students' workload increases and at that time parents put pressure on their children not to go to school, but rather help at home. Most of the children get up between 5:30 to 6:00 in the morning. Some of them cook food, make tea, or sell cow milk. Fetching water is also a task for children at home. After finishing household work, some still manage to finish their homework from the night before. Most of the parents are illiterate, so they can't help with their children's homework. In most families, there is no one to guide the children in their study; however, in families with an elder brother or sister the younger ones can get help from them, but the older siblings too have a heavy load of homework and household chores so guiding their younger siblings is a problem. Pawan (boy, age 14) said;

My mother has mental illness, when she forgets to take some medicines on that day she shouts to everybody, she spoils the whole family harmony and I can't concentrate on my studies for the next 4-5 days. My father also scolds back to her; this creates a new problem in the family. I am having a double problem, on the one hand there is no one to guide me or support me with my studies and on the other hand the little time that I have for my study is also spoiled by my parents.

Loans (for family sickness or foreign employment)

The family loans are found to be significantly bothering the adolescents. They are quite sensitive to the pain and sorrow of their parents, and wish they could help their parents to overcome the problem. If adolescents decide to go and earn money to repay the loan, they fear that they will never finish their SLC (school leaving certificate exam/ high school studies). This juxtaposition is distressful for adolescents and it is hampering their studies. This is elaborated by Sanjay (boy, age 15);

My mother goes to do labor work every day to earn a living and works extra hours to repay the loan. When she comes back home she complains of headache, body ache and cold. I feel sorry for her and think that I should leave the school and help her repay the loan, but then I feel if I leave the school my future will be dark and I will have to do hard labor like my mother so I have not been able to help her neither have I been able to concentrate on my studies fully, it's actually a terrible situation emotionally.

The loan was generally taken for two reasons: medical treatment or to apply for foreign employment. Families with poor socio-economic status cannot afford to pay the health bills from their monthly income, so a loan is the only option if they wish to treat the sick family member. The high interest and short time to repay the loans cause immense distress to the parents and this distress is transmitted to their adolescent children. Sundar's (boy, age 13) experience related to repaying the loans taken for his father's cancer treatment is an example of distress transmitted from parents to child and a collective feeling of suffering. He said;

My father died because of cancer, he was on medication for seven months. All the money got finished, we took loan and now it's a problem to repay the loan, everybody in the family is tensed so I also feel tension.

Many people from the village have tried to go to Gulf countries with the hope to earn money and repay their loan. But the fact is that they have to take an extra loan to apply for a foreign job through manpower agencies. As most of the parents are illiterate, they are not well informed about the problems in foreign employment and the existence of fake brokers. Thus, many times they are cheated by manpower agencies and left stranded without proper work documents. Samjhana (girl, age 16), shared the following story of her father being cheated by the foreign employment agent with tears from her eyes.

My father did not go to school so he could not get a good job, for many years he worked as a daily laborer and earned the family leaving. He was tired with hard labor. One day, his friend suggested to take loan from the bank, keeping the land as deposit (Dharauti) and apply for foreign employment. My father went to different manpower agencies which send Nepali people for labor work in Gulf countries. They encouraged him to apply saying that he can repay the loan within the first 2-3 months because the monthly salary is very high in Gulf countries. He believed them and took loan of 1 lakh 70 thousand rupees [one thousand seven hundred Euros] and gave it to the agent for foreign employment. The days past, weeks went by and months gone but the agent neither sent my father to foreign country nor returned the money. Because of this loan, my father is really tense, his tension increases when my mother blames him for his carelessness, nowadays we have family disputes almost regularly, at times I get so disturbed that I can't do anything.

The financial cheating and mistreatment by village and city elite has caused immense family distress in the community where I did research. Adolescents attribute the causes of cheating and distress to the illiteracy of their parents and the poverty in the family. The story narrated by Ramesh (boy, age 14), shed lights on this bitter truth.

My father sold land to a rich person for five lakh rupees [five thousand Euros] to repay the loan we took to build our house. My father, being a simple man from the village did not think of making a legal paper for the advance amount of fifty thousand rupees [five thousand Euros] he received from the rich man. Now the rich man is claiming that he gave one lakh fifty thousand rupees [one thousand five hundred Euros] to my father as advance. My father argued that he only received fifty thousand rupees but nobody believes him, everybody supports the rich man's claim. Lately my mother also started doubting [and thinks] that my father must have misused the money. Because of all these circumstances my father has not been able to repay the loan despite selling the land so he is depressed and tense so that his depression and tension has an impact on all family members."

Experiences of distress at school

The three major causes of distress (poverty, violence and workload) at home are also seen at school. Because of the lack of educational materials students don't manage to do what they are supposed to and the students' inability to come up with the right materials irritates the teachers as a consequence they start beating the students. Hence, poverty triggers inability to provide materials, which triggers irritation, which triggers beatings, which ultimately triggers distress.

Teacher's behavior

Almost all the students who were formally involved in the research and those who just had informal conversations with me during tea shared that teacher's behavior disturbed them emotionally. According to Bishnu (boy, age 16), the teachers' behavior is discriminatory. He said:

Our teachers scold us without any big issue. Most of the teachers support only the students who are better at the study. The poor students don't get enough attention from the teachers. Teachers have confidence in those who can study, but in fact the first, second and third students are cheating during the exam, but teachers don't

believe that they can cheat and thereby don't check such students while heavy checking takes place for other students. While marking the exam papers, some teachers favor their favorite students and give full marks even if there are slight mistakes and for the students who are not their favorite, the teachers carefully look for the mistakes of the students in order to reduce the marks.

Students are fearful of their teachers on the days that they have not done homework because the homework and physical punishment are closely linked. Teachers beat the students, intimidate them and sometimes send students out of the classroom when students have not done homework. Students feel deeply hurt and emotionally deserted by the humiliating behaviors of the teachers. This is clear from the following statement by Shahasi (boy, age 14), who said:

Teachers don't try to understand the problem of the students. They know the fact that we are from poor background, we have lots of household responsibilities besides the study and we don't have enough money to buy the school dress, exercise books, pens and pencils, but still when we have not been able to have new school dress and come to school in out[side] dress, teachers tell us to come only when we have new school dress, parents can't afford to buy on time and teachers don't allow us to enter the classroom, we are facing double burden.

Some students complained that when they tell the teachers that they do not understand the topic, the teachers say, "I have explained so many times why haven't you been concentrating, you will never understand". Some teachers use words that hurt students deeply, such as "You don't have the brains capable of studying, better work as *Khalasi* (bus conductor). *Khalasi* is the least respected job in Nepal; to be *Khalasi* means you are uneducated, backward and uncivilized. Some teachers also threaten to send students out of school. Srijan (boy, age 16) recounted his experience with a teacher like this.

When it's hot, the tin roof becomes hot and I feel lazy, at that time I don't get what the teacher is teaching. One afternoon the teacher was teaching I did not understand at all, I asked him questions, he explained to me but still I did not get what he was trying to tell, so I ask him again and this time the teacher thought that I was teasing him so he started threatening me. He said, "if you don't behave nicely I will send you out of this school today.

The behavior of teachers has caused a lot of distress for many students. The students don't protest at that moment because of their lower social position, but they show their resentment, and agency, by either deliberately not doing the homework and or not coming to the school the next day.

Physical punishment (beating for betterment)

During my entire fieldwork period I did not see teachers beating students, but in all interviews beating came up as major distressful event. Some of the students accused some teachers of beating the students so badly that they became unconscious or sustained injuries on their hands and back. Harikrishna (boy, age 15) said:

I had big blisters (phoka) on my palm when a teacher hit me hard. I was irritated by the teacher at that moment but after sometimes when I reflected back I thought our teachers' intention is not bad; they scold us, beat us and control us only for our brighter future so we should not think negative about our teachers.

There is certain level of acceptance for beating. The parents, teachers and the students too think that some level of physical punishment is necessary to bring desired outcomes in the life of the students. Sammber (boy, age 16) said;

I believe that teachers have to balance the beating and loving. When there is too much love students get spoiled so they need beating too. Both are needed, at times students need beating to bring them back to track while other times teacher's love can encourage out of track students to come back to track.

Though students complain about beating, they don't question the good intention of the teachers. All the students expressed that their teachers' intention is positive.

Bullying

Bullying takes place for both genders. When a boy talks nicely to a girl, other boys bully him and when a girl becomes the good friend of a boy, other girls bully her. Ramesh (boy, age 14) said:

When I don't know how to solve the homework I go and ask a female friend but at that time my male friends tease me that she is my girlfriend, this makes me angry and discourages me to approach her again.

Bullying also takes place when students are punished by having the “sit down and stand up exercise” (the student has to hold his ears by his both hands and he has to sit down and get up as many times as instructed by the teacher). This punishment is often given by teachers to students who have not done homework or who have made other mistakes such as teasing one another.

While travelling from home to school and back, senior students usually bully the junior ones by saying, “you are the son of drunkard, pauper”, “you are the son of a terrorist” (for several years the government of Nepal treated the Nepal Communist Party, the Maoists, as terrorist origination so villagers used terrorist word to intimidate those who have joined Maoist party), or “your father is crazy”, “your nose is like a monkey”, “you speak with your nose not with your mouth”. “Oh, you are in love with so and so girl, that girl is your wife and the most wise person of the world” are also a bullying statement but of lower intensity. When junior students start confronting their tormentors they are beaten by the seniors. For some students bullying is much more painful than physical punishment. As in the words of Ganesh (boy, age 13):

Physical pain does not last long, when wounds get healed, pain disappears but bullying pains much more than physical injuries, it stays inside your heart and pinches you over and over again, at times bullying is so painful that I can't stand, tears start flowing.

Discrimination (at school and at home/community)

Distress is experienced by the discriminatory behavior of peers, teachers and parents. Peers often compare each other and discriminate against others based on poverty levels and family environments. The comparisons include, “you are poor, I am rich”; “I go to an expensive school while you study in an ordinary school”; “I belong to a higher caste and you belong to a lower caste”; “your father is a drunkard and my father is sober”, are common in the village where children of rich family would go to private school whereas children from poor families attend government school.

The boys at the school feel that they are discriminated against by teachers, in the sense that teachers favor girls in all aspects. Adolescents are of the opinion that teachers accept the demands of girls while they do not bother about boys' interests and wishes. If the same mistake is made by boys and girls, boys get physical punishment and girls only get verbal

instructions or suggestions for improvement. Giving an example of homework checking practice, during a FGD Bishnu (boy, age 16) accused teachers of discriminating against boys.

When teachers know that on that day the girls group has not done homework but the boys group has done the homework, then homework checking does not take place by the teachers on that day; teachers behave as if they don't remember giving homework to the students. If the case is just opposite, girls have done homework and boys have not done, then the real homework checking starts.

Chanchal (boy, age 15) added:

Teachers beat girls so softly thinking that their body is made up of bones and flesh but teachers beat the boys thinking that a boy's body is made up of stone and mud.

While in the school the boys complain about discriminatory behavior of teachers, whereas at home boys are in privileged position and the girls complain about their parents' discriminatory behavior. Sugarika (girl, age 16) said:

I always have to ask for permission from my parents if I want to go out to visit my friends during day time, I have to come back before it gets dark, but my brother neither needs to ask permission nor he has to show up before dark. My mobility is heavily controlled while my brother enjoys mobility freedom.

Usually parents favor their son over their daughter. In most of the families it is found that the younger sons are the most loved ones for the parents. Female adolescents feel discriminated by such behavior of their parents. Priyanka (girl, age 17) said:

At home my younger brother makes mistakes but parents never beat him, rather they scold me and beat me. They love him so much that I feel discriminated [against].

Other causes of distress at school

Adolescents also identified teaching style, confusing school rules and regulations and poor infrastructures in school as causes of distress. During a FGD Sanubhai (boy, age 16) said;

The teachers use the same lecture method over and over again, we become bored at times we don't have a clue what the teacher is saying, but when he asks whether we understood the topic we happily say, yes sir, we understood it. Sometimes we feel that there is no point in saying the truth because the teacher is going to explain the topic

with the same old lecture method which we won't understand anyway, So, it's better to say we understood so the teacher is happy and we are happy at least for that moment.

Contrary to my observation of daily class routine, the schedule for extracurricular activities and the system of house division and class monitors, most of the students I interacted with said that their school does not have fixed rules. Rules change depending up on the teachers and at times the same teacher changes rules depending on his/her mood.

The rules of the schools are not clearly communicated to the students. Everything is decided by the teachers and that too haphazardly. Many times (especially during political demonstrations called in the city) we don't get clear communication whether the school will open or not. When we think the school is closed, it's open and we miss the class and when we walk up hill from our home to the school in the hot temperature the school is closed and we just waste our time and energy.

My observation showed that there is a lack of infrastructure in the community and in the school. The road leading to school is dusty during dry seasons and slippery during rainy seasons. Students carry a heavy bag filled with at least eight books and exercise books, water bottle and lunch box. While travelling on that road during monsoon, students sustain injuries to their hands and head. Travelling along a steep uphill landscape with a heavy bag after school is the most distressful events for students whose houses are a 30 minutes' walk above the school.

The school does not have enough classrooms and furniture. There is no functioning library or operational science lab. The lack of necessary materials in school has put the adolescents, particularly in grade nine and ten, in distress because they are under pressure from both their teachers and parents to excel in the school leaving certificate (SLC) exam and without proper materials they fear that their results will not be satisfactory.

Discussion

The findings of the fieldwork explained in this chapter touch upon major issues that have a negative effect on the quality of the public educational system in Nepal. I discuss a number of key issues below; (a) the beating for betterment concept, (b) double standards of treatment of Nepalese boys and girls and (c) geographies and mobility of distress as reflected in the emic problem analysis model.

First, my research showed that both students in vulnerable situations and students normally considered not vulnerable showed significant emotional distress due to physical

beating, public humiliation, bullying and discrimination at their school, home and the community. Similar findings are reported in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (WHO 2007) guidelines on psychosocial and mental health in emergencies, which emphasize social strategies to promote psychosocial wellbeing. This reflects an assumption that distressful situations are related to social conditions and the reaction to these distressful situations is socially constructed. I agree with this assumption because the findings of this study suggest that distressful situations related to discrimination, bullying and beating are associated with social conditions of caste, ethnicity, poverty, alcohol abuse and domestic violence. And similarly, the general acceptance of beating for betterment and keeping distressful experiences to oneself (silencing the distress) are the socially constructed reactions that make it possible for adolescents to cope with these distressful situations whilst it is beyond their power to change the underlying social conditions.

The students though unhappy with physical beating never protested against it, because they themselves think that teachers are beating for the betterment of the students. Parents may play the role in the development of this concept in the students' minds because they always tell their children to behave nicely at school otherwise teachers will beat. Children know that at times parents may even request teachers to beat their spoiled children to bring them back on track. This social acceptance of beating for betterment has led to an internalized positive perspective on discipline through physical violence to the extent that everybody, even the students being beaten, think that certain level of physical punishment is good for students who are off track.

The wide spread belief that physical beating comes with the good intention on the part of the teachers—that they want their students to work hard, do better studies and make their future brighter—has helped create harmony between the teachers and students despite the physical and emotional pain that comes along with beating. The students also agree that teachers are beating the students not for their own benefit but for the betterment of the students. This does not mean that adolescents accept beatings as a blessing; they do raise their voices against it and show lots of anger saying that these teachers do not beat everybody to the same extent. Students not only accept beatings, but also exercise their agency by raising their voices against it, but they don't consider it as a huge issue needing immediate attention. This, I argue is the result of the adolescents' social status and cultural acceptance of authority of adults over young ones.

Second, the findings that girls are discriminated against at home and in the community but supported at school, whereas the opposite is true for the boys show a double standard. I

argue that this might happen because of their ambivalent position in Nepalese society. The dominant religion in Nepal is Hindu, where women are worshiped as goddesses and Nepal is the same place where women are heavily dominated, suppressed, humiliated and disrespected. The discrimination at home is more acute for girls than boys. In Nepalese society, boys are more valued than girls because of the cultural belief that only by a son's action during the death ceremony (lighting the mouth of the dead parent with fire during the funeral) parents can go to heaven. Girls are treated differently because their status in the family is temporary; the girls will soon become the family member of their husband's family. The position of girls in school is quite different. Academic excellence is an equal norm for boys and girls, but teachers feel that obedience is a necessary condition for good results. The strict obedience that girls are trained in at home helps at school. Girls are serious students: they don't make unnecessary problems for the teachers and the school and they respect the teachers whereas boys in comparison to girls are generally not obedient, they try to cheat the teachers and create unnecessary hassles for them. Because of this girls are favored by teachers and boys feel discriminated against.

From this qualitative research I obtained in-depth information about adolescents' explanatory model of distress experience. The explanatory model of boys and girls for distress is more or less the same with the difference that girls have more problems with the gossip about their sexual chastity than the boys and girls fear getting married off before finishing the high school. The boys blamed the teachers more for their distress while the girls blamed the attitudes prevalent in the society and the family environment. I therefore, agree with Akello et al. (2010) and Khort et al. (2010) who are of the opinion that such explanatory models of distress experiences of adolescents at various ecological levels (the individual, his/her home, school and the community) have to be situated and analyzed within their socio-cultural context.

The emic problem analysis model (Figure 3) presented above shows that adolescent distress is spread over several ecological levels. This is in line with Bronfenbrenner (1993), who emphasizes that in order to understand human development we have to consider the entire ecological system (micro system, meso-system, exo-system, chrono-system and the gene-environment interaction). He argues that development takes shape with continuous reciprocal interactions between the person and his or her immediate environment. I agree with this, but what is missing from his model is the constant mobility of adolescents. They are constantly moving between different geographical and social contexts, and distress as well as ways to mitigate this distress are not only embedded in these contexts but also in the in

between, in the moving itself. I call this the “geographic mobility of distress” and argue that neither the distress nor the “geographies of distress” are static; they are constantly changing and are mobile within and between the geographies. I will come back to this in the conclusion chapter (chapter seven).

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to describe the perceived causes and experiences of adolescents’ distress from the point of view of the adolescents. Adolescents’ distress can be categorized into four categories; 1) distress because of their own individual physical and mental state, 2) distress because of the behaviors of the teachers and school environment, 3) distress because of bullying and intimidation by peers and 4) distress because of problems at home and in the community.

The findings suggest mainly three sources of distress (parents, teachers and friends) and three “geographies of distress” (home, school and the community). As sources of distress move from one geography to the next, the distress also moves from one setting to the next. I also suggest that distress is not static, rather its mobile affecting/or being affected by several geographies simultaneously.

The social, cultural and economic situation of the adolescents played a determinant role in the severity of the distress experienced at these three geographies. The girls were favored at school, while the boys were in privileged positions at home and in the community. But, most of the causes and experiences of distress were similar for both genders. The physical punishment, bullying, discrimination/intimidation, poor infrastructure, confusing school rules, sudden introduction of an English-medium education, teaching styles and teachers’ behaviors were causes of distress at school. At home, family loans, poverty, workload, domestic violence, substance abuse and discriminatory behavior of parents were found to be the causes of adolescent distress.

There were overlaps for causes of distress in all three geographies (see Figure 3). The distress in one situation triggered another distress either in the same setting or in another setting. For example, family poverty triggered domestic violence in the family and discrimination in the school and the community. These findings suggest that the distress is experienced at various ecological levels; individual, family, peers, school and community so interventions to reduce adolescents’ distress should also be implemented at all these levels.

CHAPTER VI

Managing Distress

For me football is the best friend in distress, when I enter the playground and start enjoying football I forget all my pains and sorrows, they come back as soon as I finish playing football but by then their impact is already reduced. -Ramesh, a 14-year-old boy

How does Sarita manage her distress?

Sarita, a 17-year-old girl lives with her father, mother and two brothers. Both of her parents are illiterate. Sarita's father used to work in a company as a helper but since last year he is not working. He drinks too much alcohol and it was the alcohol that made him unpopular at work and finally he was fired. Now he is depressed, generally tense and has increased his alcohol intake. Sarita's family has land; they produce maize and other vegetables. Sarita's mother goes to the nearby town to work as a laborer.

One day Sarita had a great deal of homework to do for school so she could not cook food on time. Sarita's father was so annoyed that she was still doing the homework. He beat her badly on her back and pulled her to the kitchen; thus, she could not finish her homework for two subjects.

The distress at home had made Sarita unhappy and this unhappiness was clearly visible in her face. When her female friends met her on the way to school, they teased her by saying, "you look sad today, what happened? Has your loved one deserted you? Don't worry you will get many boys because you are extremely beautiful." In fact, Sarita is a really beautiful girl so female friends are jealous of her beauty. Some boys are not happy with her because she did not accept their proposal for a love affair, so she is often intentionally bullied by girls, as well as boys.

When she reached the classroom the teacher asked her to present the homework that she had not managed to do because of her workload at home. She was sent out of the class by the teacher and had to stay in the corner of school veranda; this action humiliated her. She was already hurt by her father's behavior at home, her peers' behavior on the way to school and now the teacher's behavior exacerbated her suffering. It was unbearable. She went to the toilet and cried for some time. After crying she was relieved, washed her face and looked at the mirror to check whether her face still showed the anger. She discovered that she was still angry. She went back to toilet and cried again. This time she was able to manage her distress by consoling herself that in everybody's life distress is bound to come and the person has to

face it and manage it on time. She later shared all these distressful events with her best friend and her mother. The sharing gave her strength to manage the distress and she was able to handle the distress that followed.

Introduction

In chapter four I presented the adolescents' concepts and meaning of distress, in chapter five I described what adolescents attribute as the causes of their distress and how they experience distress at various ecological levels. In this chapter, I focus on the tactics and strategies used by adolescents to manage their distress. First, I present an overview of a variety of distress-management methods used by the adolescents, and then I provide my impressions on why the adolescents have chosen certain methods to manage their distress. In the discussion section, I reflect upon my findings in the context of agency-structure debate. The chapter concludes with the explanation of the main coping strategies used by adolescents at home and at the school.

Main methods/ways adolescents manage their distress

The in-depth analysis of all the field data produced the following table, which lists several ways that the adolescents described managing their distress. From the data, what emerges is that sharing distress with a best friend is the most practiced way of managing distress.

Watching TV, reading stories and poems, listening to songs, making drawings, or practicing yoga are other strategies.

Table 4. Major ways of managing distress

S.N.	Major ways of managing distress
1.	Sharing with friends
2.	Meeting friends and family members when distressed
3.	Staying in an isolated place.
4.	Making jokes, telling stories and poem.
5.	Crying
6.	Listening to nice songs
7.	Drawing
8.	Doing interesting activities
9.	Visiting nice and beautiful places
10.	Seeking psychosocial education and help
11.	Thinking less about the distress
12.	Thinking carefully before doing anything that might bring distress.
13.	Watching TV
14.	Reading newspaper
15.	Asking an elder sister or an elder brother to help with homework
16.	Drinking cold water
17.	Involving oneself in entertaining sports
18.	Sharing with family members
19.	Doing yoga in a peaceful place
20.	Reading poems and stories

Table 4 shows that there are as many as 20 ways the adolescents manage their distress.

Broadly these can be categorized into four themes: 1) sharing, 2) diversion from distressful events, 3) self-management and 4) seeking help to reduce the distress. These four themes are explained in detail below.

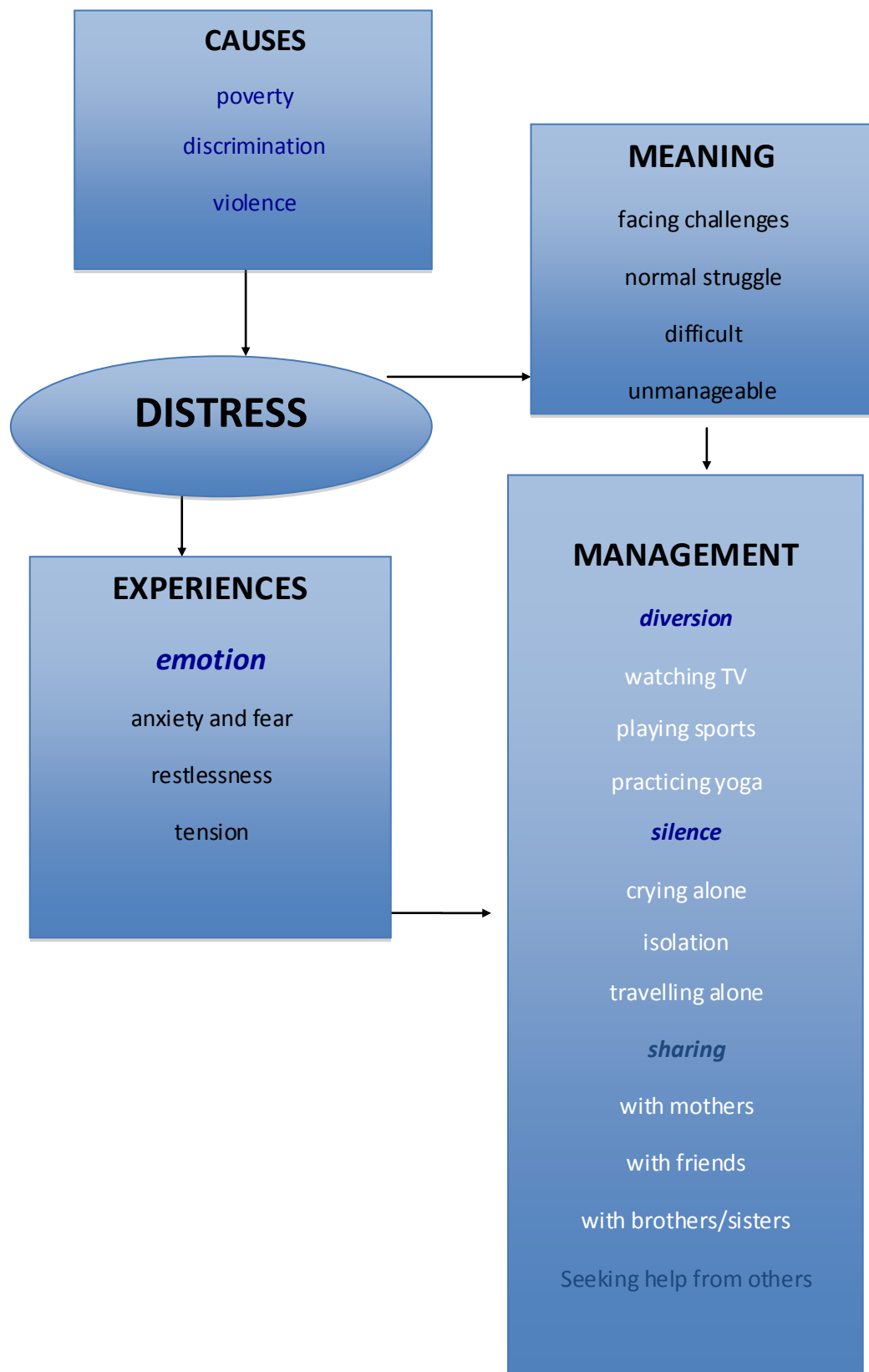


Figure 4: Emic theories of distress management

Sharing

Sharing is the most cited method of managing distress by the adolescents. Sharing takes place mainly with friends as they can understand the problem and give practical advice on how to solve it. Some of the students, mainly females, said that they share their distress with their sisters and mothers. Only few students mentioned that they also share their distress with their fathers and teachers.

The sharing with friends takes place during the difficult walk uphill or downhill on the way to and from school. For most of the students, travelling from home to school takes about 30 minutes so they have minimum of one hour per day with friends to share. “I feel relieved when I share my feelings and thoughts about my parents, teachers and home with my friends”, said Gayatri (girl, age 16). Bhisma (boy, age 15) studying in grade nine supported Gayatri’s remarks by saying:

I share my distress with my best friends because by sharing my problems with them I feel relieved and it gives me the feeling that I never had the problem.

The data suggest that the purpose of sharing varies. When adolescents share their distress with their best friends, the primary purpose is to get relief, to ventilate the difficult emotions and emotional experiences. Although there is certain level of expectation from best friends to help deal with the distress, sharing with friends is mainly done without much expectation. Shantabahadur (boy, age 17) expressed his habit of sharing his distressful experiences only with his friends:

I only share my distressful experiences and situations with my best friend because he has been helping me in my ups and down, pains and sorrows, he tries to listen to my problems and tries to suggest the best alternatives to manage them. So, I feel relieved when I share with him.

Adolescents share distressful experiences with teachers and parents with the expectation that parents (especially mothers) and teachers will act to reduce the distress or provide practical suggestions to minimize adolescent distress. Shreesti (girl, age 13) said:

I share my distressful experiences with my parents and teachers because they either try to help me by doing something themselves or they show me the ways and means to solve the problems.

Supporting Shreesti's point, Pramesh (boy, age 14) said:

There are some teachers with whom we can share our problems, they are considerate, and they show empathy, so I feel more comfortable to share my distressful experiences with the teachers and most of the time I have received support from them which helped me to reduce my distress.

Although sharing has been extensively used by adolescents, there were some distressful experiences and events which they chose not to share with anybody or share only part. For example, Sugarika (girl, age 16) said:

I share my distressful experiences with my mother only if I feel comfortable sharing the content of the distressful event, otherwise I go to a peaceful place and quietly think and brainstorm how best I can solve this problem by myself.

Some students also told me that they don't share their distressful experiences with anyone because people take undue benefit from the situation rather than helping. "I don't share my distress with anybody because nobody is going to help me solve the problems, I have to do it myself so why waste time in sharing with others, it's useless", said Sangam (boy, age 17).

Diversion from distressful experiences/events

The adolescents manage their distress with methods of diversion. They believe if individuals stick on their problems and think too much about them, then the problems become worse. Thus they think it is wise to divert the attention somewhere else, especially by involving oneself in the activities that give the enjoyment or peace of mind. Amit (boy, age 16) said:

At my house my mother is mentally ill; she scolds at us and spoils the family harmony so I go to my uncle's house or big brother's house for a few hours to get my peace of mind.

Diversion is used as a temporary relief or as an opportunity to build strength/resiliency to face distressful events. Priyanka (girl, age 17) said:

When I am really distressed, I make efforts to be happy, I meet my friends and ask them to tell jokes, the jokes make me happy and I forget my problems, I then start making jokes myself and after that funny environment with my friends I get a kind of positive energy to deal with my problems that cause distress.

It is found that if distress is related to something which is lacking at present (e.g. love, affection, prestige, status or the material property), the adolescents try to manage the distress triggered by the emptiness either by thinking of the happy moment when they had that thing or by imagining the future when they will have it. Hirakaji (boy, age 14) said:

When I am really distressed, I try to divert the distress by thinking of pleasurable time I had spent earlier or anticipated pleasure in the future.

Film and music are the most common diversion tools used by the adolescents to manage their distress. Comedy films are common for both genders, while girls generally watch Indian television serials and boys watch films related to nature, science, fighting or wrestling. In music, Nepali folk songs, modern pop songs and Nepali and Hindi cinema songs are favorites and have been used as tools to manage distress. A tenth grade student, Sangita (girl, age 17) said:

When I am really distressed, I watch films if there is electricity, if I don't have lights on that day I listen to the music either from my radio or from my mobile. After watching films or listening to music I feel better and then I don't bother with what happened in the past, I try to focus in my future.

Saroj (boy, age 15) told that he also watches television when he is distressed, but his choice is not comedy films or love stories, but rather stories related to nature and animals. He elaborated:

When I am fed up with somebody or when I have been confronted with distressful situations, I turn on the television and watch Discovery, National Geography or Animal Planet channels.

Sports are also commonly used to divert attention. For boys, football and volleyball are more common; while girls prefer to play badminton, "carom board" or local outdoor games. In the words of Ramesh (boy, age 14), sport is the best way to divert attention. He said:

For me football is the best friend in distress, when I enter the playground and start enjoying the football I forget all my pains and sorrows, they come back as soon as I finish playing football but by then their impact is already reduced.

Self- management

Sharing and the diversionary strategies explained above need human interactions and social relationships, but self-management of distress does not require social interaction. Adolescents sometimes isolate themselves from others, going to a peaceful area where nobody can disturb them. Other times, they stay inside their rooms and read books, poems or sleep. The following excerpts from FGD participants illustrate the isolation and consolation methods used by some adolescents. “I try to reduce my distress by keeping myself isolated in a peaceful place”, said Bhisma (boy, age 15). A tenth grade student Sarita (girl, age 17) said:

I usually suppress my distressful experiences, but when suppression of the feeling reaches its peak I start crying, but don't share with others. Later on, I try to manage by consoling myself that distress and happiness is wide spread, it's not only me who is suffering, many people in the world are suffering from distressful events, I just need to work with it.

Students manage their distress by keeping silent. One of the students Amit (boy, age 16) expressed that he was beaten by the teacher in front of his friends because he touched the teacher's motorbike. He was so hurt but could not do anything than to keep quiet. He elaborated his statement:

When teachers beat us or humiliate us in front of others, we become angry but we don't show anger at that moment because teachers are teachers, they are big persons and they are working for our future so on that day we feel hurt, we just keep quiet, the next day we forget and life goes on.

Agreeing with Amit, her friend, Gayatri (girl, age 16) said:

I don't want to share my inner feelings with others even if my distress is unbearable. Showing distress or pain to others does not help; you only get stigmatization in return. You know I follow what our proverb says, 'afno baha kasailai nakaha' (there is no point in sharing your deep emotional pains with others; it's not going to help).

Though silence was practiced by the majority of the adolescents, some of them did mention talking back (a verbal exchange of words when distress becomes unbearable). For example, Pawan (boy, age 13) said:

I try to bear the pain as much as possible but when it becomes unbearable, I say whatever comes to my mouth, I say dirty words to people giving me pain and I also curse them.

Supriya (girl, age 14) during a FGD said:

When I am beaten by teachers and parents without reason, I become angry and I enter into verbal discussion with them, I quarrel with them.

Some adolescents have used existing religious beliefs to console themselves. During the interview they explained to me that talking to God really helps, after taking refuge in God, the adolescents have experienced positive outcomes. Kaushilya (girl, age 14) said:

When I am distressed, I leave that place where I got distressed and move to a new peaceful, isolated place and then I express all my distress to God by crying and ask him to give me strength to manage with the distress. It has always helped me.

Seeking help to reduce the distress

Contrary to other methods (sharing, diversion and self-management) only a few adolescents spoke about seeking help. They would go to their grandparents, mothers, elder brothers, elder sisters, maternal uncles, and maternal aunts to seek help to reduce their distress. For example Bamshidhar (boy, age 14) said:

My maternal grandfather and maternal grandmother are taking good care of me, I respect them more than my biological parents because my biological parents just gave me birth and abandoned [me] but grandpa and grandma have raised me to this stage, I feel comfortable to go to them to seek help when I am really distressed.

Discussion

In the discussion section I touch up on the issues of power hierarchy, the culture of silence, the gender difference in the expression of distress and tactics and strategies used by adolescents while exerting agency in school and Nepalese societal structures. Mothers have been approached by many adolescents for suggestions to manage their distress while only a few adolescents shared their distress with their fathers. It would be interesting to know more about the impact of family dynamics on adolescents' coping with distress but due to my focus on the school setting, issues such as position of fathers, mothers and the children in Nepalese families is beyond the scope of this research.

Another issue of discussion is the widespread culture of silence. The Nepali proverb *Afno baha Kasailai nakaha* (never share one's distress/pain with others) cited by an adolescent above expresses/reflects a wide spread attitude to keep one's suffering to oneself. I argue that the use of silence by adolescents to manage their distress has roots in Nepalese social and cultural standards where the expression of distress and pain in public is not appreciated; rather a person showing distress in public is frowned upon, ridiculed and intimidated. This finding is in agreement with Akello et al. (2010) whose research among war-affected children in Uganda reported the appreciation for silencing of distress in Ugandan society.

Second, the culture of respect for the elders causes adolescents to keep quiet. Talking back to elders (in this case parents and teachers) or immediately and openly reacting to their behavior is not culturally accepted. As a student or child you are expected to respect your teachers and parents no matter if they are right or wrong.

The philosophical (existential) definition of distress explained in chapter four has been found to be helpful and somehow has become a long-term strategy for adolescents to manage their distress. Adolescents have philosophized distress as a normal phenomenon of every human around the world. The acceptance of the existence of distress, pain and sorrow in everybody's life gives them a clear roadmap to face the distress and manage it as successfully as possible. I argue that Nepalese adolescents intentionally chose this strategy as part of exercising their agency, because by keeping silent they can still influence the situation rather than talking back to their elders. Here the structure has become an internalized part ("habitus") of agency which can be better understood with the help of the concept of social navigation proposed by Lindegaard (2009). She explained how South African youngsters in uncertain circumstances navigate the positions offered to them by not being a social person (isolating themselves), by showing inclination towards feminine features to avoid violence and by acting as a coconut (sometimes acting as white person whereas other times as black person) to make the best use of the situation and the circumstances.

The choices made by adolescents to share, partly share or not to share their distressful experiences with others shows that adolescents are not just passive victims. They are social actors: within the constraints of the social structures that shape them and of which they form part, they know why they act, when to act and how to act.

Giddens (1992) was not thinking of Nepalese young adolescents when he discussed the notion of agency, but his description is apt:

The notion of agency attributes to the individual actor the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion. Within the limits of information, uncertainty, and the other constraints that exist, social actors are knowledgeable and capable. They attempt to solve problems, learn how to intervene in the flow of social events around them and monitor continuously their own actions, observing how others react to their behavior and taking note of the various contingent circumstances. [Giddens in Long 1992:22]

Whyte and colleagues (2002) argued that the power to exert agency shifts between actors in relation to distressed women and biomedicine. They said,

The doctors exert power during the initial medical encounters and women uncritically accept the prescribed benzodiazepines but in the continued use the women seem to be in control and exert their agency by performing their illness, by deviating from the prescribed dosages, by refilling the prescription from the nurses and by quitting the drug all together to gain the self- control. [Whyte et al 2002:54]

In my research I observed similar shifts, where the power to exert agency shifted between teachers and students. Teachers felt powerful and exerted agency during classes and examinations while students exerted agency by leaving the school without seeking permission from the teachers or by not responding to teachers' questions or queries.

And finally, Michel de Certeau's (1998) concept of tactics ("an art of the weak") and strategies ("calculation/ or manipulation of power relationship") may help to distinguish between the short term tactics and long term strategies used by the students in order to manage their distress. Silencing distress was a long term strategy as students calculated that given the existing power relationship for them it was much more beneficial to keep quiet than to protest against the teachers. But at times they also used short term tactics such as refusal to participate in the programs where prestige of teachers was at stake.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed several ways Nepalese adolescents manage their distress. To understand the rationale behind their choice of management tactic, it was important to explore the norms of silence and absolute respect for elders (i.e. teachers and parents). Out of the 20 ways of managing distress mentioned by the adolescents, sharing with friends was most common. Adolescents felt comfortable sharing most of their distressful events with their friends. Friends thus mean a lot to them and they are most hurt by a best friend's indifferent

behavior. Sharing with mothers, an elder brother or elder sister also took place, but only for the topics or issues that could be comfortably shared with them. Some adolescents were of the opinion that sharing one's distressful experiences with others is a waste of time; they argue that it is not useful rather it will bounce back to you in the form of stigmatization or intimidation. So, some of the adolescents choose to be isolated from people and places that reminded them of their distress and moved to peaceful places to freely cry, quietly think, peacefully brainstorm, and carefully find the best way to manage their distress.

The findings suggest that apart from the above the adolescents use the strategy of diversion from distressful experiences to manage their distress. Watching TV, reading stories and poems, listening to songs, making drawings, practicing yoga and playing sports are some of the ways to be away from distressful events and experiences. In comparison to the above three categories of distress management, the help-seeking category was the least used in practice. Only a few adolescents went to their elders to seek help to reduce their distress. This can be attributed to the rapid modernization and increasing generational gap in Nepal.

CHAPTER VII

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of my research was to gain insight into adolescents' *emic* perspectives about their everyday distress in Nepal. With this goal in mind, I explored the perceptions of students in a government high school about the causes of their distress and discovered their unmet needs and coping strategies. In this concluding chapter, I summarize the findings, revisit the main arguments made in previous chapters and finally make recommendations.

Discussion and conclusion

The concept of *dukha* (pain) in general and the adolescents' broader meaning of *dukha* in terms of poverty, discrimination, restriction on mobility and structural violence both refer to social suffering. From generation to generation the suppression of lower castes by upper castes and the 250-year-old feudal Nepalese political structure has generated widespread social suffering. This suffering, for children in particular, was exacerbated when a violent armed conflict between the Maoists rebels and government of Nepal began in 1996. Though it ended with a peace agreement, in 2006, the findings from this study suggest that the impact of conflict is still apparent in the families and communities. Adolescents reported being discriminated against on the basis of their father's or brother's association with the Maoists, and other adolescents blamed the Maoists for their poor family conditions. The shame surrounding pathetic family conditions (inability to repay a family loan, to treat sick family member or to fulfill basic needs) either due to structural violence or chronic poverty influences adolescents' perspectives and this family and community suffering is transmitted transgenerationally.

The adolescents' *emic* problem analysis model (see figure 3) shows that adolescent distress (and their larger social suffering) is spread over several ecological levels. In chapter five, I argued that Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological model showing development as shaped by continuous reciprocal interactions between a person and their immediate environment, is missing the constant mobility of adolescents. The problem analysis model shows how adolescents continually move among various geographic and social contexts. The adolescents' distress and distress-management strategies are not only embedded in these contexts, but also occur between the contexts. I call this movement, "geographies of distress". Neither the distress nor geography is static; both are in constant flux as adolescents move from one distressful event to another and from one geographic setting to another. Drawing on the

examples given by the respondents in this study, one distressful event, such as family sickness, triggers another distressful event—poverty when the family takes a loan for medical care it cannot pay back. Distress in one geographic setting, such as distress in the home, such as unemployment and low caste status, triggers distress in another setting—bullying by peers and discrimination at school due to an inability to pay for school supplies and uniforms or within the community due to low caste status and unlikelihood to ever gain employment. As adolescents constantly move between geographies, they carry their distress to various contexts where other actors react and may exacerbate or mitigate their distress. This triggering effect is easily missed in conventional ecological models. My point is also that adolescents spend a great deal of time in social contexts that are not captured by traditional ecological models since adolescent geographic and distress contexts are mobile. Nepalese adolescents are always travelling, for instance, they walk with their friends from school to home over uphill long trails. While the adolescents move through these in-between spaces, such as a dense forest with wild animals, a slippery road, or areas with people with bad intentions, they risk not only the real physical dangers, but also the risk of being bullied by student companions. On the other hand, in this in-between space on the road, the children may also have support from friends and fellow students as they share their common distress. Thus, it is exactly here, in these in-between mobile contexts, that the children can practice agency, discuss and reflect upon their experiences with their friends.

Chapter six explained the various ways that Nepalese adolescents manage their distress. The findings suggest that adolescents either opted for sharing with friends and mothers or kept quiet even when they were badly beaten by their teachers. I argue that to understand adolescents' coping with collective suffering their experience has to be understood within the Nepalese context of *karma* and fatalism. Karma is the unalterable consequence of one's prior misdeeds (Bista 1991) and fatalism encourages the individual to accept problems with the belief that whatever comes to one's life is already determined by their fate and the only thing one can do is struggle with the problems. Adolescents' positive meanings of distress were influenced by fatalistic beliefs, but these beliefs also helped them to cope. The acceptance of the existence of distress, pain and sorrow in everyone's life gave them a clear roadmap to face their distress and manage it, as successfully as possible. This understanding has become a long-term strategy for adolescents to manage their distress by silencing it.

The silencing of distress has roots in Nepalese social and cultural standards where the expression of distress and pain in public is not appreciated; rather a person showing distress in public is frowned upon, ridiculed and intimidated. The general acceptance of beating for

betterment and keeping distressful experiences to oneself (silencing the distress) are the socially constructed reactions that make it possible for adolescents to cope with these distressful situations, since it is beyond their power to change the underlying social conditions. This does not mean that adolescents accept beatings as a blessing; they do raise their voices against beatings, but rather passively. Due to a power hierarchy adolescents cannot openly protest the beatings, but they are not the passive victims. They are social actors and tactically use their agency for short-term benefits or long-term strategic benefits depending on the situation. For example, silencing distress was a long-term strategy that the adolescents thought was more beneficial than protesting against the teachers. But at times a short-term tactic, such as refusing to participate in the programs where the prestige of teachers was at stake, gave them temporary power and boosted their morale.

All these findings put me into the position to favor ethnographic approach to understand adolescents' distress. According to Geertz (1973) anthropological writings are interpretative and we, as ethnographers, should interpret other people's symbol systems from the point of view of the actor. In this study, I have tried to interpret the *emic* perspectives of adolescents on their day-to-day distress. I argue that adolescents' *emic* theories of distress have important implications for how they relate to teachers, parents, peers and the community members. Therefore, I suggest that interventions aiming for adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing should look at their *emic* theories of distress.

Recommendations

Since distress is experienced at various ecological levels, an intervention only at school is not sufficient to reduce adolescent distress. The programs at the family and community level are equally important. There is a need for a multilayered intervention providing family education, mediation and family counseling at home. Developing social harmony in the community and providing training and facilitation on corporal punishment and its impact on the students is important at the school. The research findings suggested several *emic* theories of adolescent distress; hence the school and any organizations working for the psychosocial wellbeing of the students should consider these *emic* theories of distress while planning and executing their programs.

Mobilization of existing resources is crucial. There is a children's club at the school that could have been used as mechanism to ventilate adolescent's distress. With little effort, the small library could be made functional and with a systematic planning and clear communication, much distress related to schools rules and regulations could be minimized.

One of the teachers who had good rapport with the students could be given responsibility to facilitate communication between the students and the school management.

Despite the appearance of extracurricular activities in the school, their sporadic nature has not contributed much to the reduction of adolescent distress. Hence, the school should ensure that these activities are implemented on a regular basis and students are actively involved in those programs, not only at the participation level, but also from the planning and organizing stages.

Another recommendation is that education for parents and teachers about the psychological development stages of adolescents and their needs could help create a better environment for the adolescents at school, home and in the community. This will also help bridge the wide generational gap in understanding worldviews.

Since my research was conducted in a short period of six weeks, there are many limitations, in the sense that this research could not grasp the parents and community members' views in detail. Further ethnographic research, at the family, school and in the community, is needed to understand the complete picture of adolescent distress. My theoretical framework was a meaning-centered approach and a practice theory approach, but my findings suggest that a modified ecological model, recognizing the geographic mobility of adolescents could also be used in adolescent distress research.

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ANNEX 1

Overview of Studies Conducted in Nepal

Study	Sample	Methodology	Instruments	Theoretical framework	Central Findings	Limitations
Kohrt et al. 2008	141(T) 141 (C)	Quantitative (Matched pair-cross sectional cohort study) Matched on age, sex, education and ethnicity	DSRS, CPSS , and SDQ	No Clear theoretical frame work mentioned.	former child soldiers display greater severity of mental health problems compared with children never conscripted by armed groups	Convenience sample of soldiers represents only a subset of child soldiers who returned home.
Jordans et al. 2010	164 (T) 161 (C)	Quantitative (A cluster randomized controlled trial)	DSRS, CPSS SDQ and SCARED-5	No clear theoretical frame work mentioned.	Intervention had moderate short-term beneficial effects for improving social behavioral but did not result in reduction of psychiatric symptoms.	internal reliability of SCARED-5 was low, There was no follow up after pre-post assessment
Kohrt et al. 2010	142 Child soldiers Expert purposive sampling	Quantitative and qualitative (mixed method). Qualitative methods for creating questionnaire	DSRS, CPSS, SDQ and FI	Ecological framework	Factors at the child, family, and community level contributed to differences in reintegration and psychosocial outcomes.	Communities, rather than individuals, could be unit of sampling to provide insight into social ecology.
Mahat and Scoloveno 2003	79 children 48 parents	Quantitative A cross-sectional correlational design	Child Medical Fear Scale (CMFS) nd Schoolagers' Coping Strategies Inventory (SCSI)	Cognitive development theory to explore children's fears related to medical experiences and their coping strategies.	Children had moderate levels of fear and reported using coping strategies less frequently and found them less effective than those reported by their parents.	Over -medicalization of general everyday distress. .
Tol et al 2010	Review of 44 literature on Nepal	Systematic literature review	-	Political violence	Studies on mental health are scare. Little attention is given to understand idioms of distress. Most studies are cross-sectional.	Lack of inclusion of studies done in Nepali language. Lack of longitudinal studies on mental health.

Note: Depression Self Rating Scale (DSRS), Child PTSD Symptom Scale (CPSS), Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders (SCARED-5) and Functional impairment (FI)

ANNEX 2

Overview of Studies Conducted in Countries other than Nepal

Study	Sample	Methodology	Study Instruments	Theoretical framework	Central Findings	Limitations
Akello et al. 2010 Uganda	165 Survey 24 in-depth interviews	1 year Ethnographic study Mixed method	Self made questionnaire	A grounded theory approach child actor perspective	Emotional suffering was expressed by children in physical aches and pains. Pharmaceuticals and herbal medicines were used to minimize the distress.	Victim blaming, self-blaming, mimetic resilience are not looked at the population level.
Maes and Lievens 2003 Belgium	3225 students 29 school administrator 1132 teachers	Quantitative	Survey questionnaire.	Integrated approach Socialization perspective	Only a few school structures and policies were found to influence the health and risk behavior of young people.	A more thorough examination of the paths by which schools can influence the health behavior of their pupils needs to be done.
McQueen and Henwood 2002 Britain	2 young men-adolescents	Qualitative interview	Interview checklist	Theories of subjectivities and masculinity	Attention to the issues of power/privilege/marginality provides ways of orienting to young men's expressions of distress or detachment from feeling emotion or pain	The study has limitations when it comes to understanding traditional masculine ideas within Britain.
De Jong and Reis 2010 Guinea Bissau	16 selected from convenience sampling technique	Ethnographic field work	Semi-structured and in-depth interview.	Idioms of distress	Idioms of distress have multiple manifestations and can be interpreted in several different ways. Idioms of distress exist in the situations where distress cannot be expressed and solved at socio-political level.	The idioms of distress are understood as discrete diagnostic categories or as mono-dimensional expression of trauma, which De Jong and Reis argue that it shouldn't be.
Nichter 1981 South India	100 female patients in a clinic	Qualitative	Detailed life history.	Idioms of distress	The investigation of idioms of distress needs to be located historically with respect to changing social conditions.	The analysis of gender differences in the use of local idioms of distress is lacking

ANNEX 3

List of Questions for Focus Group Discussion

Theme	Guiding Questions
Experiences of distress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When we talk about distress, what comes to your mind, how do you define distress? • How do we notice when someone is distressed? What are the local characteristics of distressed person? • What kinds of distresses do adolescents experience in our society? • Are the distresses experienced at school and family same? If not, what are the particular experiences of distress at home and at school? • What are the distressful events at home? • Could you please tell the distressful events at school? • What do adolescents do when they experience distress? Do they express it or not? If they express how do they express? • What are socially accepted ways of expressing distress?
Understanding of distress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In your opinion what causes distress? What are the factors responsible for adolescent's distress? • What meaning do you give to your distress? • How do adolescents perceive their distress? • What are the distressful behaviors of parents, teachers and peers? • When a teacher finds a distressed adolescent what does the teacher do? • When you find your friends/peers in distress what do you do? • How do you understand that they are distressed? • Do you think parents and teachers understand adolescent distress? • What type of behavior do they exhibit when they know that adolescents are distressed?
Ways of managing the distress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of strategies adolescents employ to manage their distress? • What resources/infrastructure/ rituals/religious/leisure activities is available to the adolescents to help recover from their distress and maintain psychosocial wellbeing? • Among the available resources which ones do adolescents make use of and why? • What activities or rituals are performed at your home and school to help adolescents manage their distress? • Are these activities/ or rituals helpful in your opinion to manage the adolescent distress?
Unmet needs of the adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the unmet needs of adolescents in the school and community that could help to reduce their distress related to behavioral, emotional, academic, and social problems? • How those needs could be met in the school/community?

ANNEX 4

List of Situations/Events for Participant Observation

- Attended classroom lectures to observe how the interaction takes place between teachers and students whether there are any distressful episodes during the lecture.
- Observed students inside the class during free hours or in the breaks to find out how they relate to each other, if there a competition for resources such as sitting place and to find out if is there bullying?
- Observed the students while walking from home to school and back.
- Observed adolescents behavior and group dynamics during picnic program, friendly football matches and historical site visits.