Social Psychology and Social Issues: Students’ Participation in Bridging the Gap

Suhas Shetgovekar

Faculty, Discipline of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, IGNOU, Delhi.
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Abstract

Understanding and dealing with social issues is definitely not an easy task. A social evil like ‘Sati’ was eradicated over a period of time and as a result of dedicated contributions of many and at the same time due to strict legal consequences. Thus, dealing with social issues and bringing about a social change requires intervention at many levels and by different means. There are various social issues that need to be dealt with. Some of these issues are well discussed, especially in media and to also certain extent in communities, amongst social scientists and even students. However, there are other issues that are equally relevant but do not get the adequate attention, whether its media, society or social scientists. It is thus important to first identify the social issues and then derive measures to deal with them. Social psychologists can play an important role in this regard by not only being more observant and sensitive but also by employing suitable research methodology to study these issues and design intervention strategies. Interventions can be carried out at various levels including individual, familial, community, societal, organizational, state and even at national and international levels. The present article will focus on, first of all, identifying various social issues. Further, it will also discuss about the relevance of research in order to understand these issues and its attributes. It will also focus on the significance of imbibing a sense of understanding and awareness about the social issues amongst the students of social psychology so as to develop in them a sense of concern and also identification with these issues. Thus, the article focuses on the role of both, the social psychologists of today and the social psychologists of future (students of social psychology), in order to bridge the gap between social psychology and social issues.

Keywords: Social issue, Social psychology

Introduction

Social issues can be described as certain problems that can have an impact on overall society, as well as, its members. Every society will have its own social issues that may or may not differ from social issues in other societies. Thus, defining social issues can be complex as it will depend on the perception of the members of a society and also because every society will have its own set of social issues. Understanding and dealing with social issues is definitely not an easy task. A social evil like ‘Sati’ was eradicated over a period of time and as a result of dedicated contributions of many and at the same time due to strict legal consequences. Thus, dealing with social issues and bringing about a social change requires intervention at many levels and by different means.

The present article, thus, focuses on following:

- The significance of and strategies for imbibing a sense of understanding and awareness about the social issues amongst the students of social psychology so as to develop in them a sense of concern and also identification with these issues.
- It further deals with enhancing the teaching-learning process of social psychology by including discussions and other activities related to current and relevant social issues.
- Strategies for encouraging social psychology research amongst the students’ community that are intervention based. Educating them about goals and challenges of social psychology research, so as to encourage social psychology research amongst the students, will also be covered in the present article.

E-mail Id: sshetgovekar@ignou.ac.in
Orcid Id: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8072-003X
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Further, in the present article we mainly focus on the students of social psychology as they are in a position to understand social issue better with the help of their knowledge about social psychology. These students can, in a way, lead the activities towards dealing with social issue and also promote the same amongst other students. Also, theories and principles of social psychology can be adequately applied to different areas like health, law, and environment and so on.

Significance of Students Participation

The movement against corruption by Anna Hazare and also the protests and candle march for Nirbhaya saw active participation of the youth in India. This shows a keen interest and concern amongst youth with regard to social issues. However, this interest and concern need to be channelized in a positive manner in right direction. Further, it also has to be taken beyond participation in campaigns and movements to more proactive measures in direction of dealing with social issues. The interest and the concern expressed by the youth needs to rekindled by providing a pathway that will lead to them accepting and dealing with the challenges of the social issues.

The student participation in dealing with social issues is also significant because, they are the citizens of tomorrow who will be directly affected by the social issues and will have to shoulder the responsibility of dealing with it.4 The exercises and activities at this stage will help them prepare better for challenges of tomorrow.

The participation of students in dealing with social issues can focus on the following:

- Helping students identify the social issues.
- Helping them develop right attitude and perspective.
- Channelizing their thinking and actions appropriately.
- Promoting lateral thinking amongst the students so as to facilitate new ideas and approaches of dealing with social issues.
- To develop in them a sense of social responsibility and citizenship.
- To encourage and provide necessary support in order to develop suitable strategies and action plan.
- Encourage and promote social psychology research amongst the students.

Promoting Awareness about Social Issues amongst the Students

In a college/ institutional setup it is possible to channelize the activities of the students in the direction of becoming more aware and better equipped to deal with social issues. In order to help students, understand and become more aware about social issues it is necessary to help them identify the issues, look at the issues from various dimensions and deal with issues at various levels.

Identify the issues: There are various social issues that need to be dealt with. Some of these issues are well discussed, especially in media and to a certain extent in communities, amongst social scientists and even students. However, there are other issues that are equally relevant but do not get the adequate attention, whether its media, society or social scientists. In India, there are various social issues like poverty, lack of education, health related problems, corruption, garbage and waste management, violence against women and children, ill-treatment of the elderly and even environmental issues. Many times, issues related violence, corruption and in certain cases even environmental issues do get widely covered in media whereas certain issues related to sanitation, pollution, trafficking, drinking water etc. may not receive such attention despite of being extremely important.

These issues need to be identified so that the students of social psychology are able to develop an understanding about them.

Perceiving issues from varied dimensions: The students also should be helped to look at it from various dimensions, besides social. Any social issue can be perceived from legal, political, economic and even cultural dimensions. This will help students understand issues in a better manner.

Dealing with social issues at various levels: Social issues have to be dealt at various levels right from individual, family, community, State to National and sometimes International levels. Racial discrimination and hatred against other nationalities, for example, will require strict legal and policy decisions at national and international levels. The students at their level may not be able to implement strategies at each of the above-mentioned levels. Though they can make suggestions and clarify about what role they can play.

Awareness of the above is an important step. Once the students develop some understanding about the issues, then various activities can be planned in order to promote student’s participation.

Though such activities can be carried out at the college or institutional levels, social psychology students do play a relevant role as they have some basic understanding about the principles of social psychology that can help them understand the social behaviours and issues in a better manner.

Enhancing the Teaching-learning Process of Social Psychology

The teachers play a significant role in this regard in channelizing and providing direction to the thinking process of the students in this regard. The concepts of social psychology can be explained by the teacher with the help of the social issues that are prevalent in our society. For example, while explaining the concept of prejudice and stereotype, the articles and cases regarding racial discrimination can be cited and discussed. While dealing
with topic related to social change the developments with reference to the status of women and their education can be discussed, eradication of ‘Sati’, comparative reduction in child marriage etc. can also be discussed. Cases of violence and crime can be sited while dealing with aggression. This will help the students understand the concepts and relate them to real life events. The teachers can also play an important role in guiding and helping students in planning and organizing activities and events.

Activities for Promoting Students Participation and Enhancing Teaching Learning Process

Activities that can be organized to promote awareness and encourage their active participation amongst social psychology student are as follows:

- The students may be encouraged to collect and discuss articles regarding social issues that appear in the news articles.
- Case studies can be developed in order help students understand the social issues.
- The students, in groups or individually, may be asked to identify issues that they feel are most relevant according to them and what could they do at their level.
- Films regarding social issues may be screened that can be followed by group discussion.
- Interaction with local level social activists can also be organized.
- A core group or a cell in this regard can be created to carry out various activities.
- There is some occasion or the other every month, for example, February 4th is World Children day during which awareness can be carried out about social issues related to children and activities can be carried out in association with the organizations working with such children. Similarly, March 8th is International Women’s day, June 5th is World Environment day, and October 1st is International day form the elderly. The students should be encouraged to identify these occasions and then come up with plans to organize events, field visits, discussions, lectures and so on.
- Field visits can be organized to old age homes, orphanages and other organizations so that students are able to interact and spend time with the individuals there and also learn about situation, problems and issues in these organizations. This may also help promote sensitivity amongst the students.
- Besides field visits, the students can also be encouraged to regularly visit such institution on weekly or 15 days basis. Such organizations/homes can also be adopted by the institution/colleges so that regular activities/counselling can be carried out there.
- Service learning can also be promoted amongst the students. In this there is an integration of community service with instructions. This can be termed as an effective teaching and learning strategy that help in promoting learning, encourage social responsibility amongst the students and build stronger communities.

The main goals of service learning are improving academic, as well as, social learning, developing a sense of citizenship towards one’s society, promoting learning and awareness about social issues, developing and implementing an action plan to deal with social issues and providing meaningful service to the society. This can help student first of all learn the theoretical aspect of a particular issue, relate it to the realistic situation and then after experiencing the realistic situation the student can go back to the theories and principles in order to reflect further and possible suggest certain intervention strategies or an action plan. Service learning can also help in keeping the students motivated and can help in reducing the gap between the curriculum and realistic situation.2,3

Besides knowing about the personalities who have contributed to the development of social psychology, the students should also be encouraged to know about individuals who lead the social change and movements in India like Baba Amte, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and individuals who fought against social constraints, like Sindhutai Sapkal (known as Mother of Orphans) or even Anandibai Joshi (First Woman Doctor in India). Information about contributions and achievements of these individuals needs to be provided to the students.

Thus, various simple to complex activities can be organized in order to promote student participation.

It is also important here to imbibe patience amongst the youth as social change is indeed a slow process and the activities carried out by them may not reap immediate results. This awareness is again important to maintain the motivation of the students.

Promoting Social Psychology Research amongst the Students

Besides organizing and participating in the various activities mentioned above, social psychology students can also play an active role by carrying out quality research in this area. Research can help to scientifically understand social behaviour of humans. Social psychology students can employ scientific methods in order to understand the antecedents of social issues and problems and how principles of social psychology can be applied to deal with these social issues can be carried out with active participation of the students.

Following strategies can be employed in order to imbibe social psychology research orientation amongst the students:

- The students initially can be taught about preparation of research proposals/ synopsis that serve as blueprint for research. Goals of social psychology research should also be clarified.
• The research related activities can also be integrated with internal evaluation, if possible.
• Workshops and training programmes can also be organized on both qualitative and quantitative research to promote research orientation amongst the students, especially, at post graduate levels.
• Action research can also be promoted amongst the students. As stated by Lewin, an action research that is comparative in nature and studies the conditions and effects of various social actions and leads to social action.1 Thus, the focus here is on intervention and students can be introduced to the concept of action research and should be encouraged to carry out such research under supervision.
• Students can be encouraged to take up short term research, individually or in groups.
• The findings of these researches can then be presented by them during a fixed date, every six months, where they receive feedback and suggestions.
• While promoting research amongst students it is also important to imbibe in them the relevance of ethical issues in research.
• A research unit can be created at departmental level to enhance research related activities.

Conclusion
To conclude, dealing with social issues is not an easy job nor is it instantaneous. The participation and involvement of social psychology students is just one small step in this direction.

Conflict of Interest: None

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