

The Phenomenology of Humiliation

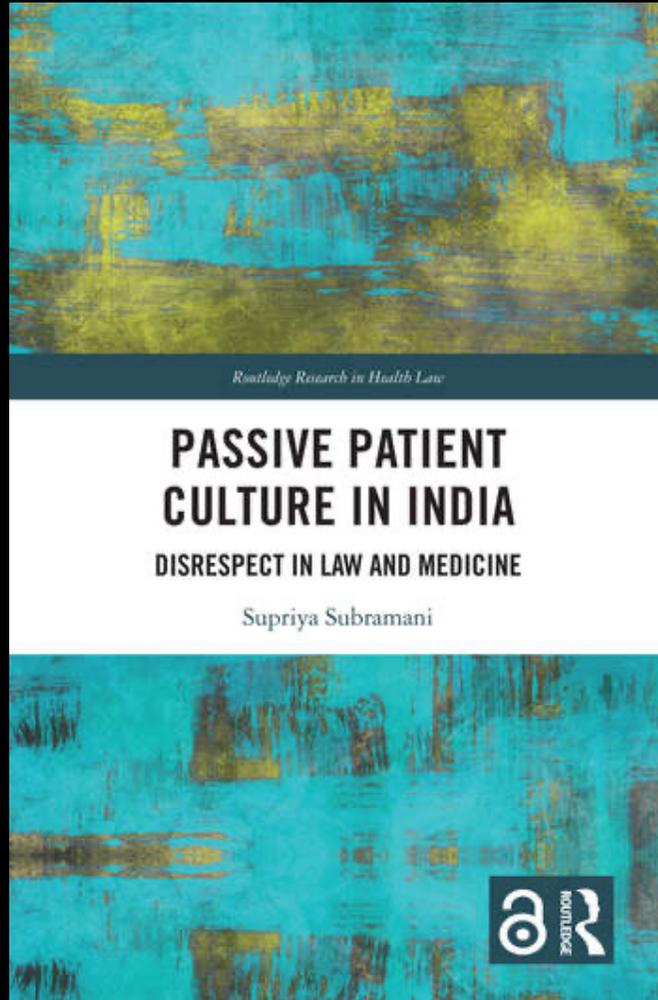
Feeling Injustice in Healthcare

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Othering and ethics of belonging in migrants' embodied healthcare experiences

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Abstract

At a time when national identities are being reasserted in Western Europe alongside moral and intellectual visions of a cosmopolitan order more inclusive than nationalism, what does belonging mean for immigrants who are non-Europeans, particularly for women from South Asia, Africa and the Middle East? Based on the lived experiences of 23 women of diverse backgrounds, who are first-generation immigrants, regarding their experiences while accessing the healthcare system in Zurich, Switzerland, I illustrate through migrant experiences how Othering and belonging are experienced within the web of chaotic meanings and social space one navigates. By employing a phenomenological–sociological approach, I present how embodied migrant experiences can capture the experiences of being an 'Other', as well as how moral emotions such as shame and humiliation can influence one's moral self and its significance to everyday moral discourse. While much of the academic discourse around belonging focuses on a place and its related connectedness to one's racial, gender and ethnic identity, here I

- Shame and Humiliation
- Humiliation: Distinct moral emotion and phenomenological category
- Phenomenology of Humiliation



“They treat us like dogs with rabies.”[1]

“I used to smoke about forty cigarettes a day. No wonder I became ill. I hate myself for not quitting the day I was diagnosed with asthma. Now I am reduced to zero, and I am the one to blame. When you are old and ill and have COPD, you do not count anymore (M 70).”[2]

“They treated me like crap and I know it was because I was Native”[3]

“Where else can people like us go? We don’t have money, so we get what we always get” [4]

Shame and Humiliation: Self-conscious Emotions

Shame

“When one is seen and judged by others (whether they are present, possible or imagined) to be flawed in some crucial way, or when some part of one's self is perceived to be inadequate inappropriate or immoral”[5]

the self is both judge and judged; the moral gaze is internalized

Humiliation is often seen as a variant or cognates of shame or assumed to be part of shame family

resists this inward turn.

Not just internal experience or feeling but a mode of being-in-the-world: it is a felt perception of one's standing in a moral field shaped by others' recognition, and more than that it reveals the condition of our being in this moral world

Shame

“Something is wrong with *me*”

Humiliation

“Something wrong was *done to me*”

That my worth, self-respect and dignity has been appraised!

ಅವಮಾನಂ, Tamil, avamanam

ಅವಮಾನ, Kannada, Avamāna

Disrespect/humiliation/Dishonour/Shame

Is not the feeling that I have done wrong, but the feeling that wrong has been done to me, that my worth, self-respect and dignity has been appraised.

To feel humiliated is to experience a fracture in the moral order, to confront the precarity of one's standing in the eyes of others, and to sense, painfully, that the very terms of recognition are never neutral.

“I keep following them [the doctors] from the ward to their offices and back. They don’t even bother to stop for a second and listen to me. I don’t know what is wrong with my mother. We have been here for the past 15 days. Some days ago, the junior nurses told me that it was some infection. They performed surgery again but did not tell me anything about it, why or what. As everywhere else, we are made to keep waiting (with sigh).”

Vani, a garment factory worker from a lower-class-caste background

Phenomenology of Humiliation

Selfhood is inherently relational, shaped through encounters with others, the self is never simply self-contained.

It emerges through being seen, recognized and situated within a social and moral world where meaning is co-constituted.

When humiliation occurs, this fundamental structure of recognition collapses—one is no longer seen as a person, but as an object of ridicule, subordination, or exclusion.

Drawing on Guru[6], to appraise an act as humiliating, and to communicate this appraisal, to oneself, to one's community, or to the humiliator, is already to make a claim about one's worth, dignity, and rights.

Taking humiliation seriously requires moving beyond the rescued-victim model that portrays those who suffer indignity as passive recipients of harm awaiting interpretation theorist.

Patients who experience humiliation in healthcare are not inert; they anticipate, negotiate and transform the terms of their subordination.

Reclaiming humiliation as a moral and phenomenological category opens new ethical and analytical ground: one in which those once humiliated are recognised not as passive sufferers but as agents whose emotions disclose the truth of injustice.

For more details

The Phenomenology of Humiliation: Feeling Injustice in Healthcare, Medical Humanities (In press)

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