

Witnessing the vulnerabilities and capabilities of one Afghan woman: Cultural values as a source of resilience in daily life

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Abstract

This personal reflection on my daily interactions with an Afghan woman, Bibi Hawa, aims to describe how I witnessed her psychological distress, partly manifested as chest pain, and her resilience to this distress in a particular Afghan socio-cultural and political context. My reflections shed light on the importance of finding a space in which resilience can be built. As mutual trust, friendship and a reciprocal guardianship developed with Bibi Hawa, I came to recognise her capabilities as a woman, mother, friend, housekeeper, breadwinner and co-worker as well as the way in which she was able to move forward by fostering resilience through building upon her own abilities and the Afghan cultural values of family unity, perseverance in overcoming challenges and dedication in fulfilling responsibilities. This reflection reiterates the importance of rethinking the ways in which cultural values can enhance resilience and the need to find the means and space to cultivate these cultural values as a source of resilience in daily life.

Keywords: Afghan women, capability, culture, daily life, resilience

INTRODUCTION

From July 2007 until September 2011, as an international consultant from Japan, I worked on government aid projects for the strengthening of teacher and literacy education in Afghanistan. As the international community began to orchestrate nation-building efforts following the first presidential election in 2004, on my initial arrival in the country, I could feel the growing optimism in Afghanistan's transition to a country enjoying socio-economic development, peace and democratic governance. I still recall the vivid images of daily life in Kabul that eased my level of vigilance when I looked out of the thick glass window of the bulletproof vehicle provided for Japanese consultants as a security measure. Visible were small children carrying backpacks emblazoned with the UNICEF logo, which looked too big for them, rushing to school in the morning; vendors idly waiting for customers in front of piles of dried figs and a variety of fresh fruit, and men engaging in conversations over tea in the afternoon. However, I began to see more reports of insurgent attacks and explosions across the country in the daily local English newspaper soon after the Taliban militants attacked Kabul Serena Hotel in 2008. By the second presidential election in 2009, disillusionment with a weak government characterised by corruption and an inability to maintain security,

and the resultant feelings of uncertainty began to encroach upon the ordinary life of many Afghans.

MY DAILY INTERACTIONS WITH BIBI HAWA

What follows are my personal reflections upon my daily interactions with my Afghan colleagues, particularly with an Afghan woman, Bibi Hawa.¹ This ethnographic account aims to present how I witnessed her psychological distress, partly manifested as chest pain, and her resilience to this distress in the particular socio-cultural and political context of Afghanistan. Bibi Hawa, an Afghan mother of three children who had lost her husband, was working as a housekeeper at our project office in Kabul. A daily 15-minute break consisting of visiting the restroom together was a unique space in which Bibi Hawa and I conducted casual conversations about weather, family, food and names of places and countries. On one hand, the limited number of English and Dari phrases that we each possessed undeniably limited the degree of communication

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possible. At the same time, my frustration with not being able to delve into her experiences and feelings made me pay more attention to the non-verbal aspects of our interactions such as her facial expressions, the movement of her hands and the tone of her voice. While trying to make sense of what I was hearing from Bibi Hawa using my knowledge of Afghan history and socio-cultural conditions, I witnessed the many layers of distress shouldered by one of an unknown number of Afghan widows. Yet, as this reflection on my communication with Bibi Hawa illustrates, I also observed moments in daily life when she demonstrated her resilience based upon Afghan cultural values.

Chatting with Bibi Hawa during the short walk to the restroom located outside within the office premises was a pleasure for me as was feeling both free and safe to walk. At the time, my mobility on foot was heavily restricted for security reasons. During these conversations, whenever Bibi Hawa told me that her son was able to speak English, her pleased and proud expression clearly reflected her strong family bonds, her dedication to her children, and her hopes and aspirations for their futures as a result of the education they were receiving.

At the same time, it appeared that not only the fragile political and economic conditions but also the daunting security challenges made it necessary for her to live with a large amount of uncertainty. At times, our conversations would be interrupted by the loud noise of the NATO helicopters overhead. At other times, following news reports of violent attacks by the Taliban in Kabul, Bibi Hawa would react to what was happening in her country. With a frown on her face and the few words spoken in her strong voice which I managed to catch, I sensed her feelings of constant fear and her frustration with the deteriorating improvements in the living conditions of many Afghans following the US-led forces ousting of the Taliban in 2001.

On one particular stroll to the restroom, we began talking about our families. While asking me how my parents were doing in Japan, Bibi Hawa unexpectedly began to disclose memories of how her husband had been shot by Taliban fighters as she mimicked the sound of gunshots. As this was so unlike her usual calm and quiet state, her exploding feelings and the tears streaming down her cheeks in front of a foreign colleague led me to infer that she had not found a safe space to release her feelings of loss, sadness, anger and injustice in this place in which civilian casualties were transformed into statistics. Statistics are easily counted, but they do not recount the history of each life that is lost.

One of Bibi Hawa's tasks at the office was cooking lunch, a highlight of the day for the team of Afghan staff and Japanese consultants. Despite being physically challenging, preparing lunch for such a large team of nearly 20 people seemed to become a meaningful space for Bibi Hawa in which she was not only distracted from the daily stresses but was also able to express herself through demonstrating her capability by playing a crucial role in the project, like a mother cooking for a large family. I

perceived that the many empty plates left on the table not only indicated everyone's satisfaction with the meal but symbolically represented the unspoken acknowledgement and appreciation of her responsible and dedicated work.

As the project was nearing its end in 2010, I sensed Bibi Hawa's growing anxiety over losing this precious source of income and the responsibility of making ends meet as the family breadwinner – particularly when she asked me whether my manager could find a position for her after the project. As we stood in the restroom, she removed her headscarf to fix her hair, exposing her fringe, which had begun to reveal the ravages of time with white and silver strands peppered around the parting of her black hair. I began to wonder whether her black hair turning white might be an embodiment of her growing uncertainty concerning her employment after the project and the enormous pressure to find a means of economic survival in the face of the Afghan social structure that acted as a barrier due to the fact that she was a woman, illiterate and a widow.

Not long after asking me whether my manager could help her find a job, Bibi Hawa began missing work due to chest pain and eventually took a few days off to see a doctor in Pakistan with her son. Although she said that she felt better with the medication provided by the doctor, I was worried about the condition of her health as well as the additional expenses incurred from her trip and the medication. Nonetheless, it did not occur to me that her chest pain was related to her psychological distress.

Before my return to Japan in September 2011, I visited Bibi Hawa in a new project office. By then, my supervisor had managed to find her a position in another Japanese project team in recognition of her hard work. I asked Bibi Hawa about her health condition and told her that I would soon be starting my studies in the United Kingdom on the mental health of conflict-affected populations. In reply, another Afghan colleague translated for me that the Pakistani doctor had told her that her chest pain was because of her mental health problem. Although this response seemed to validate the need for mental health and psychosocial support that I felt in Afghanistan, I still left the country with the following emerging questions: *'What kind of mental health problems is Bibi Hawa actually suffering from?'*, *'How did the Pakistani doctor link Bibi Hawa's chest pain and her psychological distress?'*, *'How did she explain her chest pain to the doctor?'*, *'What is the cultural belief underlying her chest pain?'* and *'Would the medication heal both her chest pain as well as the psychological pain?'*

To answer these questions, the practice of cultural psychiatry draws our attention to how specific cultural values are embodied in the processes through which people experience and cope with war trauma and daily hardships. In a particular space that is in continuous interaction with social relations and structures, cultural values foster resilience. For instance, the kitchen is a social space where Bibi Hawa's cooking abilities were instrumental in the fulfillment of not only her office role but also the role of breadwinner and mother charged with the responsibility of raising her children, whereas her chapped hands

represented her hard work and perseverance despite the demanding nature of the tasks. In contrast, the path to the washroom was a uniquely intimate space where our growing trust created a safe place for her to release suppressed emotions, such as the happiness, anger and anxiety, associated with her life dedicated to her family. As I witnessed in these spaces, the Afghan cultural values of family bonds, the dedication and responsibility required to support families, and the perseverance and effort to overcome difficulties were Bibi Hawa's sources of resilience. Despite the devastating effects of structural violence, finding the means and space to cultivate these cultural values in daily life seems a crucial component of mental health and psychosocial support.

Lastly, on reflection, the relationality between Bibi Hawa and me shaped my perceptions of one Afghan woman's well-being. In contrast with her dire socio-economic conditions, I had an unquestionably privileged position as an educated foreign consultant living in Afghanistan for a certain period of time with access to a comfortable place to sleep, safety protection measures and even citizenship to one of the safest countries in the world. In fact, the first time I was preparing to walk to the restroom by myself, Bibi Hawa volunteered to accompany me as a security guard. Initially, I simply interpreted this as a way of positioning herself within the organisational hierarchy. Nonetheless, within a socio-cultural context in which it is not expected that a young woman be seen alone outside, I also felt her enacting her knowledge of Afghan norms along with her caring personality and hidden courage to guide me in how I could live and work safely and comfortably. As our trust and friendship gradually developed, the line between the protector and the protected became blurred.

When I was leaving Afghanistan in 2011, I felt that life in Kabul was trapped in a vicious circle of violence that

continues to produce social suffering. To provide culturally competent mental health and psychosocial support, examining the vulnerability and persistent suffering of Afghan women as 'war victims', 'widows', 'illiterate women', 'victims of gender inequality' and 'silenced' may explain how their health and mental health are multi-dimensionally shaped by structural violence to a certain degree. Yet, such generalised characterisations may mask the space within which resilience is built. As mutual trust, friendship and a reciprocal guardianship with Bibi Hawa gradually developed, my initial empathy with her socio-economic disadvantages transformed into the recognition of her capabilities as a woman, mother, friend, housekeeper, breadwinner and co-worker as well as the ways in which she was able to move forward by fostering resilience built on her capabilities and Afghan cultural values. I conclude this reflection by reiterating the importance of rethinking the ways in which specific Afghan cultural values can enhance resilience and the role of mental health and psychosocial support providers in finding the means and space to cultivate these cultural values in daily life.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

¹Bibi Hawa is not her real name.