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## **Pseudo Psychological Practices in Counselling Settings in India**

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to emphasize the importance and need of evidence-based scientific psychotherapies and it criticises the pseudo psychological practices in counselling settings in Indian context. It is an increasingly accepted reality of the day that the field of pseudo psychotherapies has become broader. These pseudo practices in psychology encompass numerous unscientific and non-established so called therapeutic methods. These pseudo therapies are viewed as either a helping resource or a substitute to conventional psychological and medical treatment by the laymen. Many quacks as well as psychologists also have been practicing these pseudo therapies for a long time without checking their scientific validation. Such pseudo therapies are mainly based on placebo effect. That's why there is urgent need to educate psychologists, clients and their caretakers to learn to discriminate the scientific ways from the non-scientific ones, so that they can make right and effective health care choices for psychological treatment which are safe, effective and scientific.

**Key words:** Pseudo Psychological practices, non-evidence-based unscientific therapy, Pseudo Psychologist, quacks in counselling settings

*Rajesh Bhatt and Saumya Dhasmana*

Psychological problems are increasing day by day globally and India is not an exception. World Health Organization (2020) states that “Around 450 million people in the world are currently suffering from mental or neurological disorders and these disorders are the leading causes of disability and ill-health.” Because of this, many new psychotherapies and alternative therapies are being explored by both scientists and non-scientists. Some of the therapies are based on scientific evidences whereas many are based on false claims, merely on personal faith or belief and placebo effect. The main aim of this research paper is to indicate some rules of thumb for evaluating psychological treatment whether it is scientific or pseudoscientific.

In the process of exploring new psychotherapies and alternative therapies, some practicing psychologists and counsellors (including unqualified, untrained and self-claimed counsellors/psychologists which are known as quacks) are using unscientific methods to treat psychological and mental health problems knowingly and unknowingly. These quacks are untrained and even don't have relevant and essential basic educational qualifications and practical experiences to work in the field of Mental Health as a psychologist.

First of all, we need to understand what the scientific approach of psychology is. Basically, any scientific approach of psychology is built on factual, evidence-based research and testable principles such as problem, testable hypothesis or idea, unbiased direct and systematic observation, replication, well documentation. In other words, when psychotherapies as a treatment or intervention are studied in randomized controlled trials and can be applied as clinically effective treatment for psychological disorders if they show significant differences as a result, it is called a scientific approach. It means, scientific approaches evaluate any treatment through proper use of research methods and statistical analysis and after that the findings of the research are published in a reputed scientific journal

*Rajesh Bhatt and Saumya Dhasmana*

where any reviewer and critic is allowed to challenge, replicate or evaluate the study in more unbiased way.

Any method which is known as a (so-called) science but does not follow above mentioned standards can be called pseudoscience. It is very hard to find a clear cut and well-established definition of pseudoscience in the literature of psychology but basically a pseudoscientific treatment or intervention is one which claims to cure psychological problems on the basis of beliefs, placebo effect or very little or no research support.

The meaning of '*Pseudo*' is pretend or false. Therefore, pseudo psychology means any psychological practice or approach which is based on unscientific, false, unfounded or fraudulent and which claims to analyse and understand mind and behaviour. **APA** (2020) dictionary describes pseudo psychology as “an approach to understanding or analyzing the mind or behavior that uses unscientific or fraudulent methods.”

Many professionals other than qualified counsellors, psychologists, clinical psychologists and psychiatrists etc. are feeling a great temptation to work in the field of Mental Health because of various reasons which could be personal interest, money or fame. Beutler and Harwood (2001), state that “scientists sometimes engage in quite unscientific behavior in order to influence their peers or to obtain secondary gain.”

Psychological intervention for a mental disorder is a scientific and evidence based therapeutic process. Therefore, it should be practiced more seriously. There are various evidence based and scientific methods of treatment for psychological disorders but even then many psychologists, counsellors and quacks practice non evidence-based mental health treatments which are mainly based on personal faith of counsellor and client as well. Such unscientific practices and interventions are frequently recommended and used in mental health settings.

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*Rajesh Bhatt and Saumya Dhasmana*

There are many practices which come under the umbrella of pseudo psychology and are being practiced confidently by quacks and even by counsellors and psychologists. These practices maybe quite popular and attractive and maybe enjoyed by wide range of believers in the name of therapy by both counsellors and the clients. It has become very common for psychologists to meet such clients who have undergone such unscientific therapies to treat their mental disorders. These non-evidences based mental health treatment may include energy healing, graphology, neurolinguistic programming (NLP), crystal healing, distance healing, prayer, aura cleaning, past life regression therapy, progression and others.

It is very hard for most of clients to seek out effective mental health treatments because clients do not have information about the suitable therapeutic interventions for them. One of the major reasons is that clients are unable to read, evaluate and finalize the psychological intervention method due to their mental health problems. So, client depends on the psychologist for the methods of psychological intervention. Even it is hard for many psychotherapists also to choose appropriate psychotherapy for client due to lack of interest, knowledge and awareness. So, sometimes there is a state of confusion among the Psychologists to choose the right psychotherapy for intervention. There are hundreds of psychotherapies developed by psychologists and clinicians, so it is very difficult to differentiate therapies which have strong base of clinical research from those which are being practiced without scientific evidences. Sometimes, psychologist chooses psychotherapy as per his or her personal beliefs rather than scientific validation of psychotherapy, though this does not form any sound base for such a choice.

Majority of psychotherapists, who are practicing pseudo-scientific approaches or treatments, basically have personal beliefs about the effectiveness of their pseudoscientific treatments. Unfortunately, the findings of these treatments are based on their own practices i.e. merely on case studies rather than randomised clinical trials and they are incapable too to

*Rajesh Bhatt and Saumya Dhasmana*

observe their own confirmation biasness, prejudice and narrow mindedness about the treatment's outcome. For example, if a psychologist has strong belief in past life and karma theory, he may think that his client may also have root causes of his problems in past life where the client had committed something wrong or sinful deeds and because of this he is facing psychological problems in his current life. In this case, Psychologist may opt for past life regression therapy (a pseudo-scientific method) to explore the root causes of client's problems. Practitioners and promoters of pseudoscientific approach use the personal cure stories of their clients for advertisement instead of using the result of any randomised clinical trials to influence new clients with same problems.

In the placebo effect, the expectation of client about a treatment has strong influence on the outcome. The placebo effect is a very powerful tool in the field of medical and psychological science. When someone believes that the treatment which he is about to get during the therapy, is very effective, may feel relief in his psychological symptoms. But this relief in psychological symptoms is not due to the effectiveness of treatment but because of bogus therapy or placebo effect. Farber (2016) stressed that “placebos are inactive, ineffective substances to which a positive effect has been attributed. The greater your expectations and beliefs that something will be effective, the greater chance it has of creating a positive response.” It means client pays money for placebo effect not for any real treatment.

### **Side effect of Pseudo psychological practices**

1. Pseudo-psychological therapies and therapist can directly harm the client. By the false promotion and over claimed pseudoscientific therapies, pseudo-psychotherapists replace already established evidence based scientific therapies. When client comes under such pseudoscientific therapies, he faces negative consequences such as continued or increased psychological suffering and in some cases death. For example, a queer woman narrated her painful story about conversion therapy and its methods including counselling and heavy medications. She posted about this in her Facebook video in the month of

*Rajesh Bhatt and Saumya Dhasmana*

March 2020 and after sometimes, finally she committed suicide. The newspaper Hindustan Times (2020) covered her story after her suicide and mentioned that “suicide case of a 21-year-old queer woman from Kerala, who claimed that she had been taken to multiple de-addiction centres over three months against her will and she was put on heavy medications, in an effort to cure her non-heterosexual orientation, has drawn attention to the dubious practice of conversion therapy practised by mental health professionals in the country, experts have said. she was undergoing treatment for depression before her family took her to the de-addiction centres. Deepa Vasudevan, co-founder of Kerala-based Sahayatrika, an organization that works with lesbian/bisexual women and transmen said that parents of queer or trans people often send them to psychiatrists or psychologists to “cure” them of their sexual orientation or gender identity, to make them “normal.”

2. These therapies are unscientific and based on personal beliefs and unscientific or biased researches and are usually propagated and over claimed by some pseudo psychologist for marketing by people whose aim could be to create sensations and make money. These therapies are not evidence based that's why it can produce harm to clients.
3. Pseudo psychotherapists consume the valuable time and financial resources of the client.
4. Sometimes delay in psychological treatment can increase the psycho-pathological symptoms in the client.
5. Because of these non-evidence-based treatments, client may also develop a negative attitude towards psychological interventions that these psychotherapies or supported treatments don't work. As a result, in future, client may refuse to visit a mental health professional who can be a trained psychologist or counsellor who practices evidence based scientific psychotherapies. These clients also tend to spread the false propaganda against psychological services. In this way, these pseudo psychotherapists or quacks defame counselling profession.

*Rajesh Bhatt and Saumya Dhasmana*

Hughes (2008) argued that, “given the likely incompatibility of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) with clinical psychology's positivist scientific ethos, CAM practices should not be integrated into clinical psychology at this time.”

Normally, a psychologist spends three years for bachelor degree and then 2 years for Master's degree in psychology subject in India. Most of the Universities in India do not provide a platform where students of masters of psychology can practice counselling or do internship in specific area of interest or psychotherapy. Even after completing Masters in psychology, psychologists feel identity crisis. They have theoretical knowledge of psychotherapies and psychological disorders but don't have practical aspects to apply that knowledge. Because of this identity crisis, these students are trapped by marketing people, who are basically non-scientific and they provide these students only two- or three-days induction or orientation training program on pseudo psychological approaches and make them believe that they can now practice as a psychologist or psychotherapist. Due to lack of awareness, patience and personal beliefs many psychologists opt for pseudoscientific psychotherapies which is the easiest way. Psychology is already very rich in the context of psychotherapies and its interventions for psychological disorders. There are various well established, evidence-based and scientific psychotherapies such as behaviour therapy, cognitive therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT), psychoanalysis, Gestalt therapy and hypnosis etc. All these therapies take time, supervision and patience to learn and there is no shortcut to learn these psychotherapies.

## **Common pseudopsychological practices for psychological interventions**

Majority of quacks who are promoting pseudoscientific treatments are quite truthful in their false beliefs but not in scientific approach about the effectiveness of treatments. Here is a glimpse on some of such therapies that should be avoided by the psychologists practicing in

*Rajesh Bhatt and Saumya Dhasmana*

any field. There seems to be a more urgent and emergent need to create awareness amongst the common masses about this in order to prevent mental health.

- 1. Conversion therapy or reparative therapy** is considered as pseudoscientific therapy or unacceptable treatment in psychiatric settings today in which a therapist tries to change his client's sexual orientation from homosexuality to heterosexuality or bisexuality to heterosexuality. In the conversion therapy, therapist uses medications, psychological and also spiritual interventional methods. There is no reliable scientific evidence found so far which can prove that sexual orientation can be changed by conversion therapy but it was noted that this therapy is very harmful for the client. (Haldeman, 1999; Ford, 2001; Yoshino, 2002; & Drescher et. al., 2006). Homosexuality is no more considered as mental disorder in DSM V. So, there is no need to cure homosexuality of any person.
- 2. Graphology** – Some people falsely claim that by analyzing the handwriting of the client they can predict personality traits. This is a pseudo psychological test which is built on a belief that personality traits are influenced by handwriting of individual consciously and unconsciously and as a result, people make certain turns or quirks by the pen when they write. The Graphology is basically used in forensic lab for verification or examination of forensic documents where they match handwriting. This is not at all an established and scientifically validated psychological tool and therapy.
- 3. Hypnosis** – The effects of Hypnosis are often related to meditation. It is used for controlling mood, stress management or physical and mental relaxation. It is considered as the altered state of consciousness with deep relaxation where the client is highly responsive to the suggestions given by hypnotherapist. It is viewed as part of standard medical treatment mostly for patients having problematic physical and emotional stress in chemotherapy. However, psychology text does not incorporate it as a method to enhance or prevent mental health.

*Rajesh Bhatt and Saumya Dhasmana*

Indeed, there are many aspects of hypnotic suggestions that have been found clinically beneficial. It reduces blood pressure, anxiety, stress and pain. But there are many other claims for the use of hypnosis which undoubtedly comes within the area of pseudoscience. Such areas include the use of hypnotic regression, including

- 1) **Past Life Regression:** It is claimed that in PLR, people can see their previous life and it is believed that many psychological problems of current life have root causes in previous life.
- 2) **Progression:** In the process of progression it claimed that people can see their future of this life and next life and after watching these, people can modify their behaviour accordingly. For example, if something wrong is about to happen in future, it may be prevented by taking some steps in the present time.
- 3) **Law of attraction-** It is a kind of new thought of philosophy which claims that internal thought process can create external world. In other words, negative and positive thoughts can attract events of life according to the nature of thoughts. Farber, Neil (2016) mentioned that “the law of attraction (LOA) is the belief that the universe creates and provides for you in which your thoughts are focused on.” For example, thinking about millions of rupees will bring you millions of rupees always. The practitioners of LOA falsely claim that LOA is based on scientific principles and theory. There is no evidence to prove this law of attraction but even then, there are so many wrong claims which are basically based on self-selecting nature of positive reports or confirmation biasness. Farber, Neil (2016) concluded that evidence that the LOA is an effective way of attaining goals is anecdotal, non-scientific and self-reported. Believers of LOA report their successes more often than failures and tack coincidences as cause and effect. No doubt that a positive thought in the form of hope or confidence and positive self-image can motivate to take an action, but unrealistic and false hopes can create problems and these

*Rajesh Bhatt and Saumya Dhasmana*

may rather deteriorate the mental health. Therefore, the therapists move in a very scientific way after exploring the clients and patients in a scientific manner.

- 4) **Neuro-linguistic programming** – NLP is a process of changing someone’s thoughts and behaviours to help achieve favourable results for them. But NLP has never been considered as scientific approach as other more established therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy (Kandola, A., 2017). Roderique-Davies, Gareth. (2009) states that “today, NLP is big business with large numbers of training courses, personal development programmes, therapeutic and educational interventions purporting to be based on the principles of NLP”. Sturt, Jackie et. al., (2012) concluded their research and mentioned that “there is little evidence that NLP interventions improve health-related outcomes. This conclusion reflects the limited quantity and quality of NLP research, rather than robust evidence of no effect.” It means there are so many misleading concepts that have been introduced in NLP which are unsupported by scientific evidences. Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health (2014) reposted that “no clinical evidence on NLP for the treatment of adults with PTSD, GAD, or depression was identified.” Roderique-Davies, Gareth (2009), concludes “that after three decades, there is still no credible theoretical basis for NLP, researchers having failed to establish any evidence for its efficacy that is not anecdotal.” Now NLP which still lacks practitioners has completed more than 4 decades of its beginning, but it is in therapeutic effectiveness and the scientific validity of the its theories. Interestingly, NLP is used as an example of pseudo-scientific practice in many universities worldwide.
- 5) **Subliminal Perception** – Some believers claim that auditory or visual information which is below the threshold of conscious awareness of individual has influential and durable impact on the individual. They use audio tapes in which hidden subliminal messages are given with this belief that these hidden messages will cure the client’s problems. The mainstream scientists do not agree that subliminal perception has any strong, long lasting and therapeutic effect on client’s behaviour. Daniel Goleman (1990) stressed in his article

*Rajesh Bhatt and Saumya Dhasmana*

on subliminal perception that there are no trustworthy or authentic scientific evidences that the hidden messages or subliminal perception can cure or persuade. Daniel Goleman mentions about Timothy Moore, a renowned psychologist at York University in Toronto, where Timothy says that "there's a huge gap between the scientific data on subliminal perception and the extravagant claims made for it, for example, I regard subliminal tapes as a form of health fraud." Companies which promote subliminal tapes are basically based on personal satisfaction of clients. It means company uses testimonials only of those clients who get satisfaction coincidentally or by placebo effect, rather than by randomized control clinical trials.

- 6) **Reiki:** "Reiki is a system involving the laying on of hands developed in Japan in the early 20th century" (Miles & True, 2003). The believers of reiki claim that this technique which is based on palm healing, a form of alternative treatment through universal energy *qi* (chi) to be transferred from the practitioner to the patient and has capacity to heal mind, body and soul by making emotional as well as spiritual equilibrium. Basically, it is also a kind of pseudo-science and its effectiveness is similar to placebo effect. In Reiki, practitioners also use relaxation techniques with visualization and as we know that relaxation techniques are effective for management of various psychological problems. So, it may be possible that few studies which claim the effectiveness of Reiki may be because of relaxation itself because there is no empirical evidence found for *qi* (chi) as a life force in the universe which is claimed by Reiki practitioner as healing energy.
- 7) **Faith healing and prayer**– Faith healing is considered a kind of simplest act of curing disease with the help of prayer and faith. In this process, the preacher would put his hands upon the forehead or any part of the patient where any healing is required and then introduce some kind of divine intervention so that the patient would be cured. This technique is also based on placebo effect and come under the pseudoscience because the evidence of this technique is purely empirical rather than scientific evidence based. Empirical evidence means when believer of it keenly believes that it works. In the prayer,

*Rajesh Bhatt and Saumya Dhasmana*

some kind of meditation is also introduced and people may get benefits of meditation instead of solely prayer. **Stack, Charlie (2018)** concluded about faith healing that “this can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, which we have learned can have a strong correlation between belief and something happening. Of course, if you have AIDS, or a broken leg, and you go to a faith healer believing it will disappear, it will not, but if you go for a small sickness and believe it, it is possible. It is possible that belief can help the functioning of our immune system, and this is an explanation for faith healing. Beliefs have such a big influence on our outcomes on life. Not everyone has good experiences with faith healing, though. With no scientific backing or true evidence, it is still extraordinary.

- 8) **Crystal healing** – Many people believe that some crystals have healing power and properties. Regal, Brian (2009) concluded that there is no scientific evidence which can prove that crystal healing has any effect on human.
- 9) **Aura cleaning**- some people have faith that every physical or psychological disease occurs when an individual’s aura gets contaminated by some kind of negative energy or any entity is attached in individual’s aura.

### **How to distinguish pseudo psychologist and professional Psychologist**

There is some information by which client may evaluate his psychologist before making professional relationship with psychologist for psychological interventions.

1. **Essential Education/qualification:** The psychologist/counsellor must have a degree of Master of Psychology.
2. **Institutional affiliation:** Psychologist’s course must be approved by Government’s Ministry or Educational Body which regulates such degree, diploma or courses.
3. **Professional training:** standardised and supervised training under the expert of mental health professional is very important and critical aspect of learning psychotherapies and enhancing counselling skills because in this professional training, psychologist learns

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various professional practices, tools, skills and values and gains psychological expertise. It helps learners (psychologist) to convert their theoretical knowledge into practical or applicable skills for managing psychological problems of the clients.

4. **Psychologist's experience in specific field of counselling:** to deal the specific area of psychological problems, need special training of that particular area. Make sure that your psychologist has relevant expertise for which you are seeking help and support. For example, if a client is struggling with his addiction of drugs then he must seek help from rehabilitation psychologist.
5. **Intervention techniques:** Always ask your psychologist that what kind of psychotherapy he uses to treat psychological problems. The psychotherapy used by your psychologist should be scientific and evidence based. To check the credibility of psychotherapy, the client may google it.

So always check that your psychologist qualifies above mentioned criteria. Never feel hesitant to ask your psychologist about his or her qualification, experiences and the therapy which he is about to use in the treatment process.

Many psychologists have developed theoretical concepts and different techniques to deal with the psychopathology of the client. Some of these techniques are based on research but many are not. Placebo effect plays a great role to establish false cause and effect relationship because many people get benefits from pseudoscientific treatments not because of the effectiveness of treatment but because of placebo effect. Client wastes his time and money unknowingly if he undergoes any ineffective pseudoscientific psychotherapy which is based on placebo effect. Selecting right therapy and therapist is very crucial for client to overcome psychological problems and prevent as well as enhance the mental health.

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*Rajesh Bhatt and Saumya Dhasmana*

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*Rajesh Bhatt and Saumya Dhasmana*

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