



COMMENT ON THE SYMPOSIUM “CULTURE AND DELUSION”

ADVANTAGES AND POSSIBLE PITFALLS OF THE CONCEPT OF CULTURAL DELUSIONS

Toshiya Murai¹

ISSN: 2283-8961

In the symposium addressing the relationship between culture and delusions, I was particularly impressed by Micol Ascoli's case presentation and by the term cultural delusions, introduced by Donato Zupin. I fully agree with their proposal to classify delusions into two groups - individual delusions and cultural delusions. Inspired by their ideas, I would like to further formalize the notion of a “cultural delusion,” although my definition diverges from theirs in certain respects.

I propose that an individual delusion arises when a patient correctly understands the cultural context but misinterprets a specific event. For example, although a patient fully acknowledges that it is implausible in their culture for ordinary citizens to be under surveillance, they nevertheless hold the firm belief that an espionage agent is specifically spying on the patient. By contrast, a cultural delusion occurs when a patient

¹Psychiatrist and professor, Department of Psychiatry, Kyoto University Graduate School of Medicine, Mail to: murai@kuhp.kyoto-u.ac.jp.

misconstrues the cultural context itself. In this case, a patient believes, for example, that espionage agencies routinely monitor ordinary citizens, even though their culture is not one in which such surveillance exists.

This distinction may help reconcile the apparent discrepancy between the presentations by Tsutomu Kumazaki and Senkei Ueno in the same symposium. At first glance, their positions may seem contradictory: Tsutomu argued that a formal definition of delusion is impossible, whereas Senkei suggested that such a definition is indeed achievable. I would propose reframing Tsutomu's claim as "a formal definition of delusion that encompasses both individual and cultural delusions is impossible." Conversely, Senkei's claim could be reframed as "a formal definition of delusion is possible insofar as it concerns only individual delusions."

Thus far I have discussed the utility of the concept of cultural delusions. By introducing this concept, psychiatrists gain an enriched framework through which to more appropriately and thoroughly apprehend the inner worlds of patients. Moreover, as suggested above, the concept may shed light on the long-standing conceptual challenge of defining delusions.

Despite these advantages, I would like to offer a brief remark on a potential pitfall that may arise if the notion of cultural delusions is applied too broadly beyond medical contexts. In my definition, a cultural delusion involves a misperception of the cultural context itself - for instance, believing that espionage agencies routinely target ordinary citizens when this is not in fact a feature of one's culture. We may quickly recognize that this definition bears a striking resemblance to that of conspiracy theories. If so, the well-known pitfalls associated with labelling beliefs as conspiracy theories may likewise arise when applying the term cultural delusion.

In increasingly polarized political environments in some countries, accusations such as "You are influenced by conspiracy theories" are exchanged between opposing groups, often with little productive outcome. Similarly, the appealing phrase "cultural delusion" could easily be misappropriated for unproductive and mutually disparaging claims such as "You have cultural delusions" and "No - you are the one who has cultural delusions!"

To prevent the misuse of what I believe is a valuable conceptual tool, I propose two possible approaches for its responsible application. One possibility is to restrict the term's usage to clinical settings, avoiding its deployment in political discourse or social criticism. A second, more ambitious possibility is to allow the term to be used in social or political contexts, but only with great care and reflexivity. In this latter case, I strongly recommend that users of the term make every effort to recognize and minimize their own cultural biases and, ideally, employ the term not as a weapon against others but as a means of self-reflection and self-appraisal.