

The Politics of Health Education: A Cultural Analysis of Tobacco Control Communication in India

Authors : Ajay Ivan

Abstract : This paper focuses on the cultural politics of health-promotional and disease-preventive pedagogic practices in the context of the national tobacco control programme in India. Tobacco consumption is typically problematised as a paradox: tobacco poses objective health risks such as cancer and heart disease, but its production, sale and export contribute significantly to state revenue. A blanket ban on tobacco products, therefore, is infeasible though desirable. Instead, initiatives against tobacco use have prioritised awareness creation and behaviour change to reduce its demand. This paper argues that public health communication is not, as commonly assumed, an apolitical and neutral transmission of disease-preventive information. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, it examines such campaigns as techniques of disciplining people rather than coercing them to give up tobacco use, which would be both impractical and counter-productive. At the level of the population, these programmes constitute a security mechanism that reduces risks without eliminating them, so as to ensure an optimal level of public health without hampering the economy. Anti-tobacco pedagogy thus aligns with a contemporary paradigm of health that emphasises risk-assessment and lifestyle management as tools of governance, using pedagogic techniques to teach people how to be healthy. The paper analyses the pictorial health warnings on tobacco packets and anti-tobacco advertisements in movie theatres mandated by the state, along with awareness-creation messages circulated by anti-tobacco advocacy groups in India, to show how they discursively construct tobacco and its consumption as a health risk. Smoking is resignified from a pleasurable and sociable practice to a deadly addiction that jeopardises the health of those who smoke and those who passively inhale the smoke. While disseminating information about the health risks of tobacco, these initiatives employ emotional and affective techniques of persuasion to discipline tobacco users. They incite fear of death and of social ostracism to motivate behaviour change, complementing their appeals to reason. Tobacco is portrayed as a grave moral danger to the family and a detriment to the vitality of the nation, such that using it contradicts one's duties as a parent or citizen. Awareness programmes reproduce prevailing societal assumptions about health and disease, normalcy and deviance, and proper and improper conduct. Pedagogy thus functions as an apparatus of public health governance, recruiting subjects as volunteers in their own regulation and aligning their personal goals and aspirations to the objectives of tobacco control. The paper links this calculated management of subjectivity and the self-responsibilisation of the pedagogic subject to a distinct mode of neoliberal civic governance in contemporary India. Health features prominently in this mode of governance that serves the biopolitical obligation of the state as laid down in Article 39 of the Constitution, which includes a duty to ensure the health of its citizens. Insofar as the health of individuals is concerned, the problem is how to balance this duty of the state with the fundamental right of the citizen to choose how to live. Public health pedagogy, by directing the citizen's 'free' choice without unduly infringing upon it, offers a tactical solution.

Keywords : public health communication, pedagogic power, tobacco control, neoliberal governance

Conference Title : ICMH 2022 : International Conference on Medical Humanities

Conference Location : Istanbul, Türkiye

Conference Dates : July 28-29, 2022