From Context-Free to Aggregate Universality: Life Skills Courses and The Making of Automated Therapy in Bengaluru, India

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Abstract: This paper uses life-skills training courses and an automated therapeutic self-help app from Bengaluru, India, as lenses through which to investigate universalizing processes of psychology and therapy and some of its frictions. How is psychological universality achieved in these courses and in the app, and in so far as context comes to matter, how does it do so? We show that, in the case of the courses, universality is assumed to be bounded and context-free, while in the case of the app it is 'aggregated'. Thus, the different ways in which achieving the universal is aspired to in these two cases is linked to a shift in the meaning of 'context, which is bracketed in the first case and operationalized in the second. In the former, it is a cultural feature to be silenced or reduced; in the latter, it is the generative material of the aggregate universal itself. While in life-skills training courses universality is assumed to be free of context, automated therapy is pragmatic and assembles context to generate what we call 'aggregated universality'.
[universality, science, psychology, India, digitization]

This paper uses life-skills training courses and an automated therapeutic self-help app from India as lenses to investigate universalizing processes of psychology and therapy and some of the frictions involved. These techniques and technologies address everyday emotional and relational afflictions and offer micro-therapeutic interventions for self-care and self-improvement. We understand 'therapeutic' not in the narrow medical sense, but in a broader sense of attentive support or self-care. Both approaches assume, and seek to produce, psychological subjects that are grounded in self-work, and both work with formalized scripts (Akrich 1992): they differ in how they aspire to achieve universality. The divergent ways the universal is imagined and aspired to in these two cases – by bracketing context in the first case and by operationalizing context in the second – is linked to a shift in the meaning of 'context.' While in the life-skills training courses universality is assumed to be free of context, automated therapy assembles contexts to generate what we call 'aggregated universality'. Crucially, while the context life-skills trainers silence is a cultural feature, the context operationalized and put in use

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by automated therapy is a narrow one. While the universal as context-free is fixed and stable, the aggregate universal in automated therapy is moving, emerging and unstable.

This paper contributes to anthropological research on the globalization of what is often understood as 'western' psychology, a particular way of interpreting and working on the self and of responding to suffering based on psychological and psychiatric (psy) knowledge. A recent body of scholarship has considered the rise of (popular) psychology, therapy and counselling and the travel of psychological ideas and language into the everyday in India and beyond (Chua 2013; Duncan 2018; Illouz 2008; Matza 2018; Vorhölter 2019; Zhang 2017). The global rise of psychology carries particular imaginaries of mental and emotional well-being and suffering and is linked to broader social and economic changes such as the emergence of a new middle class, consumerism, rapid urbanization, and the rise of humanitarian and global mental health activity. These new 'technologies of the self' aim to promote and cultivate self-knowledge, articulation, responsibility and empowerment (Foucault 1988; Rose 1998). While often linked to neoliberal transformations of governance, political economy and subjectivity, 'psy regimes' also provide orientations and new forms of care in worlds that are rapidly changing or falling apart. Although global psy ideas potentially transform people's ways of relating to their own and others' suffering, they are also transformed as they are appropriated and adapted around the globe. Many of these transdiagnostic and popular therapeutic practices are based on ideas about the universal value of behavioral activation, the verbal articulation of distress and self-work grounded in an agentic, responsible self that rationally works through everyday forms of distress and conflict.

Critics worry about psychological imperialism and the (neo-) colonization of non-Western others, which they fear create 'monocultures of the mind' (Shiva 1993) through which the world becomes 'crazy like us' (Watters 2010). Others take issue with normative assumptions of what Davies has called the 'happiness industry' (Davies 2016), which obscures the importance of emotional discontent. They also argue that these approaches are oblivious to context by ignoring 'local culture' (Lutz 1985; Obeyesekere 1985) and by psychologizing or individualizing political, economic and social conditions (Mills and Fernando 2014; Sathaye 2008; Sax and Lang 2021). These depictions contrast with the perspectives of some psychologists and psychiatrists from former colonial territories who reject the 'ethnopsychological' emphasis on cultural difference, recover psychology and psychiatry from colonial and racist influences, and stress the universality of mental suffering and of psychological interventions (Heaton 2013; Kilroy-Marac 2019; Vorhölter, this special issue; Lovell et al. 2019).

Because automated therapy developed in Bengaluru is situated in this larger context of self-work and self-improvement, we read its universalizing practices through the example of life-skills courses in Bengaluru from the early 2000s, when an early articulation of the popularization of psychology was taking place in India. In Bengaluru, as in other IT metropoles, including Silicon Valley, psychology has entered the IT industry and other workplaces in the form of soft-skills training (Sathaye 2008; Upadhya 2013). The same is true of ideas and practices of New Age mindfulness and

spirituality (Gooptu 2013). Popular psychology and New Age spirituality have grown exponentially in Bengaluru over the last twenty years or so – in the workplace, in management contexts and in schools and colleges – and for all sorts of relationship issues, as browsing in any Indian bookstore or media outlet shows. Both life-skills trainings and automated therapy as they are practiced and designed in Bengaluru are based on assumptions that are situated in the English-speaking, middle-class, techno-cosmopolitan and often elite-educated backgrounds of their practitioners and designers, but are assumed to be universal, standard and applicable across heterogenous contexts. These assumptions include, for example, universal ideas of self-responsibilization and self-work, of well-being as an individual achievement, of the therapeutic effect of venting troubling thoughts and emotions, and of the therapeutic value of the experience of being listened to and feeling heard.

We are both anthropologists, though we write from different situatedness and locations. Sonali is a Bengaluru-based US-trained Indian anthropologist, teacher and drama writer. In the early 2000s, she conducted fieldwork on life-skills courses in Bengaluru as part of an ethnography of the rise of the mental health 'industry' in urban India. Earlier, Sonali had worked on notions of emotion and self in the US through fieldwork with two theater actor training schools. Claudia is a German-based anthropologist. Since 2019, Claudia has been conducting research on the digitization and automation of mental health in India with designers and psychologists in Bengaluru. In 2021, we both collaborated in an online project with Indian participants in which we experimented with a Bengaluru-produced mental health app and engaged in introspection, diary writing and regular online group exchange. This group included a psychologist and psychotherapist, a lawyer and blogger, and we two anthropologists. We wrote this paper collaboratively, using Sonali's ethnographic material on the life-skills courses, Claudia's interviews and discussions with the app's designers, and our joint experiences with the diary-writing project and experimenting with the app. Although the life-skills courses and the automated therapy are certainly not the same, both are forms of what we conceive of as 'therapeutic': popular, everyday forms of working on the self-aimed at achieving psychological well-being.

Psychological Universality in Life-Skills Training

The interrogation of the self and its nature is certainly not new to India, nor is the idea that self-work requires effort, practices and diligence. Trainers in life-skills courses in Bengaluru in the early 2000s taught that psychological well-being requires self-work, technique and guidance. However, instead of relying on tradition or a relationship with a *guru*, trainers emphasized the grounding of life-skills training in the science and universality of psychology. Although historically contingent and often associated with postindustrial and neoliberal capitalism, individualization and the rise of consumer

culture (Illouz 2008; Rose 1998), trainers – middle-class residents of Bengaluru, most of them female and Hindu – proclaim psychology and psychology-based self-work to be universal because it is grounded in science.

Drawing on Sonali's participant observation in life-skills training courses in Bengaluru in the early 2000s, in this section we discuss the life-skills teachings, analyse some of their underlying assumptions and provide examples of frictions. These courses, not only draw on and are generative of psychology as a context-free universal, they also illustrate some of the limitations of psychology's universalizing endeavours and the ways the psychological universal is created through asymmetrical communication. We explore how trainers make universalizing-as-decontextualizing logics work. We argue that in these courses, the universality of psychology as a science was foundationally assumed to be context-free. In the early 2000s, psychological ideas of life-skills, self-work and self-improvement were still new in post-liberalization India, but training and counselling centres soon started to mushroom throughout the city.

Swayambhu[1] was one of the premier counselling agencies in Bengaluru. Activist and alternative organizations appreciated the agency for its ability to work in a scientific and non-normative manner across a range of sensitive issues, including sexuality and sexual violence. It also held regular courses to educate largely middle-class English-speakers on psychological techniques, both those who wanted to become trainers themselves and those who sought techniques to improve the quality of their own lives.

This case study focuses on one of Swayambhu's listening-skills courses, which was held two mornings per week over seven weeks. The group comprised thirteen people – two men and eleven women. Five of the women were housewives; the rest of the group included a lawyer, a medical doctor, a software engineer, a physicist, a civil servant, two retired teachers and an anthropologist. Almost all of us were there because we had heard of the course through friends who had highly recommended it. Of our trainers, two had learnt their counselling skills at Swayambhu. As usual in events addressing a middle-class audience, the language of instruction was English.

In the classroom the mood was expectant. The three instructors generated a certain gravitas as they cautioned us about the 'journey of self-awareness' on which we were about to embark. We were advised to go 'step-by-step, slowly' since we might encounter unanticipated difficulties. During the weeks that followed, one of the counsellors often expressed her own 'anxiety' about our well-being. She said, 'Be prepared for consequences … take care of yourself, be safe.' At other times she said, 'This was a lot of personal sharing: careful, are you sure you will be able to take care of yourself?' Or, 'I am a little uncomfortable right now – the sharings were very personal, and I don't want to start something and not finish it. I just want you to know that there are people you can speak to if you feel the need to do so.' By 'people' she meant the instructors at Swayambhu.

1 Swayambhu is a pseudonym, as are the names of the trainers.

Much of what we were told in the listening-skills course focused on bodily techniques to improve effective communication and promote better listening. Good listening, as it emerged from this course, was assertive listening. Key among the techniques was 'achieving eye-contact', something that trainers agreed was not necessarily considered appropriate in 'our culture', by which they meant in India. Beginning a lesson with a discussion of the importance of 'eye contact in communication', Sushmita, one of the instructors, said: 'In our culture, we have been taught to look down when an elder talks to us – isn't that so? Our teachers tell us to "look down, don't look in my face, don't stare".' She went on to talk of how, although it may not be part of 'our culture', eye-contact is an essential component of what she called 'effective communication'. It signals trustworthiness, she explained, where its opposite, looking down or not straight in someone's eyes, is surely a sign of shiftiness. For Sushmita, a habitus guided by 'our culture' would be to look down or not to make eye contact, depending on age, status and gender, while the good, correct or scientific way of effective embodied communication involved looking the other person straight in the eyes. In this case, moving towards universality as context-free, understood here as culture-free, was understood as deliberately overcoming or reducing the obstacles of cultural impulses and practices. Another instructor, Payal, told us: 'Heads, arms, legs, [are] very important. You are sending out signals with your hand movements, body movements. Automatically, hands folded [Payal folds her hands over her chest] means putting up a big barrier, a big wall. It's like a closed door. From that side the conversation is over.'

Beyond bodily techniques, effective listening and communication also involved verbal skills such as articulating or verbalizing feelings. A reliance on verbal articulation was wired into the very structure of the course on listening skills. Every class at Swayambhu began and ended with the 'feeling check', a verbal description of how we were feeling at that moment. Each of us had been equipped with a 'feeling wheel', a chart of emotion words. We were supposed to find the word that best corresponded to the nuance of our feeling on that particular day. The trainers disallowed certain words. Amos said: 'Words like fine, nice, good, or bad are very ambiguous. Try to take the help of the list we have given you. It is very difficult to know, to get in touch with your real feelings.'

Another important feature was the correct formulation of messages. Suhaila and Padma defined the 'assertive' personality as one who 'speaks with a lot of 'I'-statements' and thereby indicates their 'self-confidence'. This stress on I-statements differed from the way most of us had grown up to speak. An assertive personality, we learnt, is different from the 'aggressive' and 'passive' types who either blame others for their shortcomings or do not speak up at all. An 'assertive' type maintains 'self-respect', an attitude that also makes others feel respected. Payal taught us that, in "assertive communication', the intention is to stand up for my rights, and I do not violate another's rights.' While in the 'passive' mode the speaker follows an 'I lose-you win' model, and in the 'aggressive' it is only about the speaker 'winning', the 'assertive' communicator allows for a 'win-win' situation. All instructors agreed that an 'assertive' personality is

'in touch with their feelings' but, unlike an 'aggressive' person, she does not ever let her own feelings get in the way of her own or another's 'self-respect'.

Instructors also emphasized that the maintenance of what they termed 'boundaries' is imperative to the creation and sustenance of all healthy relationships, whether familial, social or professional. To illustrate the tangibility of these barriers, Payal told us a story about an annoying neighbour and her relief when she recognized what was 'actually going on'. 'I didn't know it was a case of boundary violation', she said, 'because I didn't know such a thing existed.' When one of the attendants questioned Payal on the need for such a formulation – why could she not simply say she found her neighbour annoying – Payal was unfazed. She smiled indulgently to agree that this is indeed the case with 'most people in India.' 'Everyone's boundaries are different, but people [in India] may not even know that word.' Not knowing the word 'boundary', according to Payal, became a handicap in skillfully and assertively responding to the situation.

Those who speak English in India know well the meaning of 'boundary' as something that physically delineates the limits of something, as a translation of the commonly used Sanskrit word '*seema*' that regularly crops up in the context of national boundaries. It is also a popular name for women, referring to the virtue of a woman's boundaries to protect the reputation of the family over her own desires. The perils of boundary-crossing are dire, especially for women who choose to follow their (sexual) desires. This meaning of 'boundary' in the Indian context is at odds with how our trainer would have us understand the term. Understood as the psychological limits of a bounded, autonomous entity, the trainer had us valorizing the gratification of desires and psychological boundaries that arise within that bounded self.

Broadly, we learnt that life-skills entailed, as Payal said, putting 'our own needs first', this too being different from the values we grew up with. In the 'feeling-check' circles that happened every morning, students at Swayambhu related their continued difficulties in putting into practice the idea of putting themselves first. Seema said in a tone of exasperation: 'I still find myself involuntarily putting others before me. It's a hard habit to break.' Another participant, a middle-aged bureaucrat who frequently expressed gratitude to the trainers for the 'difference' they have made in his life, knitted his brow to say, 'You know, I went to convent schools as a child, and there we were given the example of Jesus, of turning the other cheek, like Jesus did. I recognize this as a belief I have, but how do I change? How do I become assertive, take care of my needs, get respect from other people?'

Trainers agreed that skills such as assertive listening, bodily techniques or verbal articulation of feelings can be learnt. 'You're learning a skill', Sushmita told us. 'It's like you're learning to drive.' At one of the courses on 'Interpersonal Communication', one woman asked in a timid voice, 'Madam, I'm just wondering how do we get to there [assertiveness] – by learning, right?', to which the trainer responded, 'I agree, some of what we are is what we call 'personality', but also we learn through observation. There is always room for learning provided we have an open mind. Observe your boss [or anyone who] comes out a winner; observe him to see what he does right.' The other

trainer said, 'Don't worry. I'll show you tips, examples, so you can modify your behaviour accordingly.'

Life-skills trainers considered themselves to be on a civilizing mission; they were propagating science, empowerment and development to overcome what they denigrated as the psychological limitations of 'Indian culture' or 'traditional values'. Training came with a package of normative moral assumptions about the self, relationships and well-being that trainers took as being applicable across diverse contexts. Their assumptions reflected similar attitudes in the context of New Age management and entrepreneurial skills in Bengaluru (Rose 1996; Upadhya 2013).

One of the reasons for the rapid growth of life-skills training in Bengaluru and beyond, we suggest, has been their grounding in psychology as a *science*, as opposed to what trainers often denigratingly lumped together as *culture.* Much of what we learnt was different from the habitus we had grown up with. For trainers, culture was an obstacle, and science was truth. They often mentioned the need to rid society of the cultural baggage and 'stigma' attached to approaching mental health professionals. Implicit in this formula was the notion that the latter, rather than religious or spiritual figures, were best able to provide guidance in working through problems and pursuing self-improvement, untainted, they argued, by the burdens of tradition or superstition.

Although the kind of self-work instantiated by the life-skills courses was foundational for designing automated therapy in Bengaluru fifteen years later, the psychological universal of these courses as context-free differed significantly from another psychological universality – aggregated universality – in automated therapy, to which we turn in our second case study.

Aggregated Universality in Automated Therapy

Wysa[2] is a chatbot in the figure of a gender-neutral penguin. It was designed and developed by a team of software engineers, psychologists and conversation designers in a startup that was until recently solely located in a middle-class neighbourhood in Bengaluru, but now also has offices in Boston and London. Wysa is designed to be what its designers call a 'digital coach', 'AI friend' or 'happiness buddy', who checks in daily. An emotional resilience tool built into your smartphone, it listens to you, asks you questions and provides support. Using natural language-processing and interpreting and responding to free speech, it aims to help users reduce their distress, get in touch with their emotions and thought patterns, deal with distressing situations, and develop resilience. So far, Wysa works mainly in English, though there is a Spanish test version already on the market and a soon-to-be-released Hindi audio version that addresses a

2 For Wysa, we use the real name of the app and of the designers, since they have explicitly asked us to do so.

wider audience than the hitherto middle-class, English-speaking users. A well-being tool that is anonymous, available around the clock and fits in your pocket, the app reworks the therapeutic encounter, and the therapeutic relationship, into a digital encounter with a machine and bridges temporal and spatial obstacles.

The free version of Wysa provides chats with a chatbot and self-help exercises in mindfulness, managing anxiety and sleeping problems, and developing coping and problem-solving skills. For a fee of around USD eighty a month, the premium version provides chats with one of Wysa's human psychologists or counsellors. The app is therapeutic in the sense that it provides attentive support or self-care not only through its self-help exercises, which it partly resembles, but also goes beyond the life-skills taught in the training course. Its chatbot also mimics a psychotherapist. According to its designers, Wysa addresses what they call the 'missing middle of mental health': people who need more than mindfulness exercises, but not (yet) a human therapist, psychiatrist or medication. As of February 2024, Wysa's website claims that the app has helped 5 million people in 95 countries.[3] Wysa collaborates with insurance companies, private hospitals, health-care systems in countries as the UK or Singapore, and venture capital companies based in the US and India. Wysa's designers and psychologists draw on but also contribute to evidence-based mental-health interventions (Saha et al. 2022). Providing therapeutic work outside the clinic, the app reaches out to many more people than could be reached by conventional therapy, rendering the therapeutic more accessible, more scalable and part of everyday self-work.

Designers imagined Wysa responding to mental health needs, particularly those of the young, by reconfiguring the spatiality and temporality of care and therapy. They thought of automated therapy as stepping into geographical and temporal gaps in care, and they imagined therapeutic possibilities being decoupled from place-based and time-fixed human therapeutic encounters. They imagined Wysa as providing ubiquitous care, located, as it were, in everyone's smartphone. Wysa also remakes *temporalities* of care by facilitating immediate and instantaneous therapeutic or consoling engagement: insta-care. As Wysa's designers aim to build radically new mental-health futures by designing automated care, they encode their situated assumptions about the worlds in which this app is to be put to use into algorithms, even while crafting these worlds. These assumptions are rooted in the middle-class, upper-caste, techno-cosmopolitan, elite-educated and entrepreneurial backgrounds and values of their Indian designers.

Unlike the life-skills courses, which aimed to improve listening and other skills by developing assertiveness, Wysa's designers are preoccupied with the question of how to program a chatbot with listening, empathy and therapeutic skills. But Wysa offers a puzzle. How can a bot address heterogenous experiences and articulations of distress in a way that users find meaningful enough to stay in a conversation and continue resorting to the app for the everyday therapeutic? How does an automated therapist

3 https://wysa.io, accessed 15 March, 2024.

become universal enough? Wysa does this, we argue, by bracketing wider contextual meanings on the one hand, and by reducing context to the actual conversational thread on the other.

Cutting Across

Wysa's algorithms, contents, tutorials and exercises address a psyche that the app's designers consider to be universal across the globe. In spite of people's heterogenous ways of experiencing and articulating distress, the Wysa team programs the artificial intelligence (AI) to recognize patterns and respond in highly standardized, algorithmically enabled ways. Designers encode what they take to be universal assumptions about the psyche into algorithms. While these assumptions are taken to be context-free, another kind of (narrower) context becomes important for the functioning of therapeutic encounters with the bot. We will first turn to these context-free assumptions before examining the production of aggregate universality through mobilizing narrow context.

Designers translate standardized notions of psyche, therapy and well-being into codes and make them portable, unmoored from their historical and social contexts. The chatbot, psychologist Chaitali Sinha stated in an interview, is programmed to recognize universal patterns and provide appropriate responses, even if users express their distress in very diverse terms. 'There are some universal things that allow us to do something that is generic across very large parts of the population, some universal principles that cut across', she stressed. These assumptions include the following notions: the need for a metaphorical safe space to articulate distress and be listened to; mental health and well-being as an outcome of rigorous self-observation and analysis; suffering arising from negative thoughts; the need to control these thoughts and emotions; self-acceptance; and the possibility of a therapeutic alliance with an AI therapist. Anonymity, along with the fact that Wysa is a chatbot and not a human being, is key to this placeless cloud-like safe space that is assumed to be universally applicable.

Wysa's designers started from the assumption that venting troubling thoughts and emotions to an empathetic listener has a therapeutic effect. A chatbot's empathetic listening shares with assertive listening in the life-skills courses the importance of listening for psychological self-work, but it differs in that it focuses on users' experiences of being listened to and heard, rather than on developing assertive listening skills themselves.

Wysa's founder, Jo Aggarwal, talked about her own experiences with diary writing in her youth. For her, Wysa was a kind of diary, but one that writes back and that enables a cathartic 'typing off' of vexing and distressing thoughts and emotions while providing feedback from an AI therapist. Jo shared the information that she herself used Wysa for typing off thoughts she considers too disruptive to confide to a close person and too minor to discuss with a human therapist. She spoke about thoughts and emotions that she felt were either embarrassing or wounding to others, and stated that she preferred to confide to a conversational agent. These were small, everyday things,

minor emotional upheavals, not worth being brought to a psychologist's clinic, things that require a quick 'typing off' and a chatbot's response because they are transient and do not indicate a deeper meaning or truth. Similarly, Chaitali, the psychologist in the team, observed for herself the difference between talking to a human therapist and typing with Wysa. One of the ways they differ, she said, is that typing with Wysa 'feels more like an internal process, a bit more safe. It's still mine, my world. It allows me to be more honest,' whereas talking to a therapist feels 'more public, it requires more courage.' This experience of typing as intimate and safe, she felt, is also the reason why a therapeutic alliance develops more quickly with a chatbot than with a human therapist.

The idea that talking and being listened to in a safe space is therapeutically beneficial has a long genealogy, from Aristotle's notion of catharsis, to the Catholic confessional, psychoanalysis and other therapeutic practices, peer-to-peer help, and telephone helplines (Zeavin 2021). This hydraulic model of mental health in which venting is regarded as therapeutic is also the basis of Global Mental Health interventions in India and beyond, in which laypeople work as listeners. 'A lot of global mental health projects work based on this concept where listening reduces distress,' Chaitali stated, drawing on her experience of working in one of them. 'This was also an assumption that Wysa started with: if we just create a space where someone can feel heard, that can lead to a reduction in distress.' Wysa designers program the bot so as to enable this experience of feeling heard.

The developers imagined the chatbot to enable venting and the experience of being listened to or heard – these words are used interchangeably – independently from a human listener. Programmers, conversation designers and psychologists saw one of their key tasks as developing and adapting algorithms and content to respond empathetically and universally *enough* for users to feel listened to and gain trust. As a technical tool and business model, Wysa's therapeutic universality is pragmatic, with the bot intended to provide users with a satisfactory experience of empathy and a genuine response despite their heterogenous sociocultural contexts. While the universality of experience and therapeutic needs has been an object of contestation between actors and critical scholars of global mental health (Biehl and Petryna 2013; Gaudillière et al. 2022; Lovell et al. 2019), others have emphasized universality's contingency even in interventionist approaches. For example, Bemme (2019) argues that, in the context of global mental health interventions, where knowledge produced is actionable rather than true knowledge, universals are pragmatic. Wysa's universality emerges as similarly pragmatic.

The chatbot's listening like a therapist is key and involves compassionate questions, nudges and empathetic responses. According to one conversation designer in the team, Wysa has moved from passive to active listening. While earlier, she said, Wysa's algorithms responded to articulations of distress by saying, 'I hear you. Go on,' more recent algorithms respond more actively by saying, for example, 'I hear you are having troubles with your relationship with [whoever person the user has mentioned]. Now I get it. Tell me more about it.' As she explained, 'there is a part of acknowledgement

that comes in along with the gentle nudge to tell or share more.' Other than a human therapist, Wysa does not (yet) respond to non-verbal embodied articulations of distress. Although quite different in terms of methods and sociality, this reduction of automated communication to linguistic articulations of feeling and distress mirrors the stress on verbalizing feelings in the life-skills training courses.

Apart from venting and listening, Wysa also works with the assumption of asking questions to elicit critical self-reflection regarding potentially pathogenic thought patterns, a practice that Jo called 'Socratic' and that also underlies cognitive behavioural therapy. As in the case of life-skills courses, Wysa's scripted communication patterns assume and are generative of a psychological subject that is keen on working through problems by working on the self. 'Think of it like a gym,' Jo suggested; 'a gym not for the body but for the self.' In order to help users on their path to self-knowledge and wisdom-oriented self-care, Wysa's algorithms and self-help exercises are programmed with an eclectic mix of diverse therapeutic approaches oriented towards self-care, such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), Rogerian principles and mindfulness. Like a Rogerian therapist, Wysa is programmed to display unconditional positive regard for users by listening empathetically and restating the client's articulations. Wysa's designers draw on the experimental approaches of the designers of early computer therapists, notably ELIZA, the world's first such automated therapist, which also used Rogerian principles in its technique of repeating users' statements (Weizenbaum 1966). CBT and mindfulness practices have been widely acknowledged as being evidence-based. Both approaches seem to be 'chatbotable', and many well-being apps on the market are based on mindfulness, CBT or a combination of the two (Jablonsky 2021). In many conversations, the bot plays back users' verbal utterances, asks about the emotional effects of particular thoughts, and nudges them to reframe them. This also involves a distancing from negative ideas (or 'beliefs') by imagining supportive others' reactions to maladaptive cognitive and emotional orientations. Following up on key words and phrases, it suggests self-help exercises with short meditations, autogenic training and tutorials designed to promote acceptance, gratitude, compassion and empowerment. Here is an example of Wysa listening and nudging to reframe thoughts in the exercise 'minimizing isolating thoughts' from Claudia's diary.

> 'I shared the thought "I can't talk to anybody".' Wysa acknowledged my sharing of that thought and introduced me to a little exercise of fact checking. Then it suggested a cognitive reframing exercise: 'We can now reframe the unhelpful thoughts to ones that give you confidence and hope, or try mindfulness to nurture feelings of connection with yourself.' I decided to press 'work on my thoughts'. 'The first step', I was told, 'in moving forward from a thought that makes us feel stuck is to understand why we are thinking this way and to recognize any negative patterns. So we can then reframe the thought to change how we feel. One way to do that is to spot the distortion in your thoughts.' I replied that I'm ready to try. Wysa then listed

> for me some typical examples of distortions such as catastrophe thinking (I might die) or overgeneralizing (I will never succeed). It tells me, 'Sometimes you might confuse your thoughts or feelings with reality and take your emotions as evidence of truth.' Wysa continued to prompt me, 'Ask yourself, am I thinking this way just because I'm feeling low right now? Try to consider if the thought is making you feel better or worse. Focus on feeling better before you allow any thoughts that make it worse. I can help you with that.' After another little example, Wysa asked me to think about my negative thought, what I thought it might tell me, and formulate a thought that gave me confidence. I entered one and agreed that 'it makes me feel better than the other, negative one.'

In our experimenting with the app, the psychologist and therapist, the lawyer and blogger, and the two anthropologists in our group were divided in their assessment and experience of reframing thoughts. While some found exercises of reframing thoughts and emotions such as the one above helpful, others were more sceptical about the idea of discerning thoughts, emotions and imaginaries as inessential and replacing them with more adaptive ones. Soumya found them helpful to 'introspect', as she said, as they offered her simple suggestions to think otherwise. Anita was critical about the normative distinction between adaptive and unhelpful thoughts. Sonali compared the idea of reframing thoughts to her own experience with several spiritual approaches and found the chatbot's emphasis on keeping control over thoughts and emotions disturbing and, in her words, characteristic of 'western' approaches to well-being. Anita and Sonali would have preferred an approach more accepting of any kinds of thoughts as they emerged.

Creating 'gratitude lists' by drawing on positive psychology is another technique that Wysa used to install a more positive attitude in users' experiences of the world. For Soumya, using gratitude lists with Wysa has become a habit. Routinely drawing up these lists has helped her to build an overall attitude of gratitude, she recounted. But these gratitude lists also run the danger of becoming mechanical, ritualistic, 'like doing puja', she said. Moreover, Sonali found that the bot seemed to be more attuned to some entries in the gratitude list and less to others, testifying to normative assumptions of well-being and the good life. She wrote in her diary:

> This morning, as part of the 'mindfulness' program, it asked me what I was 'grateful for.' At the first go, I answered, 'sunlight', 'birds singing' and 'clean air'. It gave me some version of 'nice, nice, anything else?' and at the end, produced a little frame in which my responses were presented. I decided to try it one more time to see how it would respond with different answers. This time I answered 'children', 'health' and 'husband'. This was clearly an answer that the penguin was more prepared for because before we got to the replay of my answers, it said, 'Here's a little gift for you', and displayed a picture of a penguin smiling sweetly with little floating hearts around it and above it the words 'children, what I am grateful for'.

As this experience with Wysa illustrates, chatbot-afforded therapeutic conversations and everyday workings on the self are disaggregated from wider contexts of individual experiences and the situatedness in which they unfold. The fact that Sonali resides in one of India's most polluted and traffic-noisy cities would have provided a local context for responding to her valuing the sight of sunlight, the sound of birds singing and clean air. Wysa is oblivious to this context and is obviously programmed to recognize as universal the value of children, health, and a husband in a relationship – but in Sonali's case, this missed the mark.

Similar to the life-skills training sessions, in Wysa the bracketing of wider contexts affords universality across the cultural or linguistic particularities of the milieus in which Wysa is put to use. As such, Wysa also resembles other global (mental) health programs that transcend 'local context' through scalable interventions (Adams 2016; Gaudillière et al. 2022). As automated therapy's engineers move the mental health or psychological discourse into the digital realm, they seek to pragmatically sidestep the longstanding problem of universality versus the culture-specificity of mental distress and mental health-care by rendering it technical, digital and manageable. According to Chaitali, the app is programmed to provide responses their designers consider appropriate even if users express their distress in very diverse terms. Contrary to everything that she had learnt from cross-cultural psychology and psychiatry, her experience as a psychologist with Wysa had shown her that a lack of context or being 'agnostic of context' as she termed it, is no obstacle to effective therapeutic communication. On the contrary, this kind of de-contextualized texting with chatbots or with humans can potentially bring a conversation faster to what she considered the core issue. Moreover, the bot is programmed based on the assumption of the possibility of therapeutic communication on what she called 'core distress' or 'core emotion', which enables, she stressed, 'conversations beyond culture'.

But in Wysa, the psychological *universal-as-context-free* sits in a productive tension with the *universal-as-aggregate*. The aggregate universal, instead of bracketing context, rather engages and operationalizes it in order to make the AI therapist work by facilitating meaningful responses – although these are not always successful. This is another form of contextualization, a narrow context, scaled down to what users offer in the beginning of a conversational thread. It is to this narrow context that we now turn to.

Narrow Context and Aggregated Universality

In pursing universality, Wysa not only brackets context, it also considers, even relies on, context. However, this is not a context understood as cultural features, but rather one that enables the AI-enabled therapeutic conversations to function. It is within one particular conversational context that Wysa reads further articulations in one particular session. 'The AI can only use the context within this one conversation', one of Wysa's conversational designers explained. 'The users share something, we get context

from that text and we [the bot] respond appropriately.' What designers call 'context gathering' at the beginning of a conversation is helpful for the AI to break down complex user text and analyze it by distinguishing different 'contexts', such as relationship, work or financial problems. In total, there are around 150 AI models active in Wysa at different stages of the conversation, and the conversation design team decides which models are used in which AI, and when.

This is how a conversational thread works: conversations with Wysa typically consist of three parts. In the first one, in which the listening aspect plays a major role, AI models for context-gathering are active. These allow the AI to discern the kind of problem the user is talking about. In the second part, the AI evaluates users' openness to try exercises or techniques offered through text, audio or video. In this stage, a typical bot question would be, 'Would you like to try this exercise that I have for you?' or 'Would you like to try a technique to help with your negative thoughts?' Based on the first two parts, where context is established as specification of a problem and as preferences of choices, Wysa's algorithms choose one of the scripted standard interventions, for example the compilation of a gratitude list, a safety plan or an anxiety intervention. These are highly standardized, and the user has limited agency to use the intervention creatively, although they have the option of dropping out or moving to another one. Since at this stage the designers do not want the user to go off-track, they offer limited scope for giving more context. Here, Wysa leads the conversation, nudging the user to compile a list or to do an exercise. At neither stage of the conversation is the wider socio-political-cultural frame of the distress taken into account. The lack of situatedness or wider contextualization of the therapeutic encounter between user and bot limits the ability of automated therapy to work towards the meaning and interpretation of distress and suffering, as many rather meaningless conversations of participants of our experimenting group with Wysa have shown.

Not only are complex socio-ecological-emotional problems difficult for Wysa to handle in a meaningful way, the very therapeutic techniques inscribed and encoded into Wysa focus less on the meanings of thoughts and emotions within wider ecologies of meaning than on the functionality and dysfunctionality of a thought, and this is assumed to be standard. The context that Wysa *does* extract is modest and narrow – just enough data to respond appropriately and meaningfully. Context is being reformulated as something that allows the AI to function rather than something that distinguishes individual experiences and situatedness.

Wysa's algorithms are based on 'natural language-processing', an approach that uses computers to process and analyse large amounts of natural language data. Technically, it consists of, first, reading comprehension and pattern recognition (Natural Language Understanding) in unstructured free text, and second, generating what appears for users to be authentic and empathetic textual responses to free text by using pre-scripted modules (Natural Language Generation) written by conversation designers and psychologists. Wysa does this by repeating and addressing the core ideas that users are trying to communicate. The chatbot plays these core ideas back and nudges users to tell

more. The better the AI recognizes patterns, the more emotionally 'intelligent', empathetic and responsive the bot seems.

Wysa's conversations work with aggregated data from thousands of conversations retrieved through natural language models, through which designers create and continuously refine algorithms and scripts to respond to users' distress. It is through this process of integrating an increasing amount of aggregated data of successful and failed conversations that Wysa works towards ever more universality: an aggregated universality, understood as processual. Humans and algorithms collaborate to produce the big data yielded for aggregated universality. Designers and algorithms monitor and learn from users' successful and failed conversations. Detecting failures is the result of both algorithmic and human labour, as AI engineer Geetha describes:

> We have an AI model to detect frictions or moments when the conversation is heading towards a failure. But we periodically do this analysis manually as well. Ultimately, AI models are just computer algorithms which have a tendency to fail sometimes. So we do need manual interventions to keep checking how well our models are performing. Periodically we look at user data from a certain time frame, we do the tagging or annotating manually. We tag the data in order to see that here the user was unhappy but the model didn't detect it, so our model needs to be improved. Through our analysis, we may also find places where the user is responding in a way which was not expected during the conversation design. So we can go back to the conversation design team and say, this is also a kind of response you need to account for while designing this.

By analysing thousands of chat records, Wysa's programmers and algorithms learn which categories people use to articulate distress, when the algorithms recognize or fail to recognize them, when users continue conversations and when they drop out. Users' aggregated behaviour of complying with the app, rejecting it, or even dropping out, along with Wysa's algorithms and programmers, coders, and content writers, collaborate in moving the AI towards ever greater universality and communicating more effectively. Wysa learns and changes along the way as its algorithms are recoded with traces of users' engagement and frustration. The more aggregated information Wysa harvests, the more universal the app becomes. Wysa's aggregated therapeutic universality is then assumed, produced and fine-tuned by data practices and algorithmic and human labour. While the life-skills training courses do not provide for the possibility of feedback but rather export a standardized model into the world as an 'immutable mobile' (Latour 1990), Wysa remains open to feedback loops and integrates diversity into its human-algorithmic work towards ever greater universality.

What transpires in the shift from universality-as-context-free to the aggregate universal are different conceptualizations of context. The contexts that life-skills training courses bracket are the same contexts that anthropologists strive for in their 'thick descriptions', or that critical scholars of global health refer to when they criticize global health knowledge production and interventions as de-contextualized.

Following Seaver's (2015) call to 'examin[e] contextualization as a practice in its own right', and to investigate 'how 'context' is differently imagined and managed by different groups of people' (ibid. 2015:1105), we argue that *while the wider context is similarly bracketed in Wysa as it is in Swayambhu, the context that matters for the app is narrower.* The context that Wysa mobilizes refers to the information the AI collects at the beginning of each session. As one of Wysa's AI engineers explained:

> There will be a particular model that helps gathering context. We train the model by giving it a lot of examples where the sentences are related, for example, to relationship problems. Similarly, we can feed it with a lot of sentences related to work problems, or financial problems. Then the model learns on its own to distinguish between these different kinds of context.

This is an 'operational' and limited context, for instance, the specification of a classificatory term (such as relationship) within a conversational thread, which makes the AI work. Wysa's operational context resembles other context-aware computing systems, such as 'digital phenotyping' (Semel 2022) or music recommender systems (Seaver 2015). In Wysa, both universalities – universality as context-free, and universality as aggregated and assembling operationalized contexts – interact. These universalities produce a productive tension between bracketing socio-cultural-economic context on the one hand and operationalizing context on the other.

Wysa's designers posit a universal user that they define as aggregated data who is listened to, asked for choices and provided with an intervention. In contrast to the bounded universality of the life-skills training courses, Wysa's universality is aggregated and processual. It deploys a future-oriented universality-in-the-making; always in flux, it emerges through continuous processes of improvement and integration. With more and more data from failed and successful user-AI interactions, designers learn where and how to tweak the algorithms to adapt and improve Wysa's responding. The more heterogenous the harvested data, the more universal the bot becomes. Because the user imagined as data remains in flux, Wysa itself – the bot therapist – is a moving target; it is a reiterative, open-ended and open-minded practice of continued interaction with the ever shifting yet standardized user. Because the figure of the user appears as an aggregated data subject, universality-in-the-making is produced by ever more data accumulation.

Conclusion

Using the cases of life-skills training courses and an automated therapy self-help app from Bengaluru, we have explored two divergent modes of imagining and producing psychological universality. Although both offer and encourage psychological self-work and improvement, they differ in the way universality is imagined and achieved: either

by bracketing or by operationalizing context. This, we have shown, is linked to a shift in the meaning of 'context'. While the context that life-skills trainers silence are the cultural features, the context of automated therapy is an operationalized and narrow one. And while the universal as context-free is fixed and stable, the aggregate universal in automated therapy is moving, emerging and unstable.

In contrast to other cases where psychology emerges as relational and adapted to local lived realities (Vorhölter, this issue), in Swayambhu's life-skills courses the wider local socio-political-cultural context was bracketed, and psychology's universality was regarded as bounded. The aim of the courses was not to open up psychology towards more variety and thus greater and more encompassing universality (see Nieber and Vorhölter, this issue). Rather, in the way it was used and circulated by Swayambhu, psychology became an 'immutable mobile' (Latour 1990). As is commonly the case in global (mental) health programs and interventions, trainers placed local context largely under the banner of 'ignorance' and as therefore as an obstacle to effective self-work.

In contrast, Wysa's universality was pragmatic and aggregated. In the app, psychological knowledge and practice encoded into the chatbot's algorithms pragmatically aimed to be universal enough to work across contexts and variously situated users. The universality that emerges in Wysa's automated therapy for global use is a processual, aggregated universality. It is characterized by universalization as continuous improvement through integrating more and more aggregated data drawn from AI-user-designer feedback loops.

In both case studies, the universality of psychological knowledge and practices emerges as both a set of underlying assumptions and an effect. Universal assumptions of mental distress and of pursuing mental health and well-being have allowed psychology and therapy to become universal, as did universalizing practices grounded in erasing culture in the first case and in data-mining in the second.

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