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## DISCUSSION

### Response to Calderon-Margalit et al: the asymmetry of empathy

VIDIT PANCHAL

#### Abstract

*This response to the critique of my reflection engages with concerns raised by professors at the Braun School of Public Health, HUJI. While acknowledging their disappointment, I reaffirm my central argument that Israeli academia, despite individual gestures, collectively failed to create an institutional culture enabling fearless engagement with Gaza's humanitarian catastrophe. Workshops and academic forums inadequately addressed the crisis, depicting selective empathy and technocratic detachment. Universities bear ethical responsibility during atrocities, their silence, intentional or systemic, risks complicity in injustice.*

**Keywords:** empathy, genocide, ethical discourse, dissent

I read the response [1] to my reflective piece [2] by my professors at the Braun School of Public Health and Community Medicine (HUJI), an institute that indeed has a legacy of creating leaders in public health and maintains, along with strong commitment, a distinct educational environment of which I too have been a beneficiary, amidst difficult times. Acknowledging their disappointment with my reflections, which is evident in their response, I would like to respond within the theme of my reflections, standing by the fact that respect can co-exist with criticism.

The professors emphasise that opportunities existed for open discussion on Gaza, and that I did not mention that some faculty members voiced dissent in Israeli public forums. I would like to state that the central issue raised in my reflections is the collective failure of the entire academic community in Israel that includes those academicians with dissenting opinions, as well as those who openly sided with the hyper-nationalists. Academicians of "all kinds" of opinions could not prevent or reduce the impact of violence on either side; however difficult this was for them. However, in such times one expects them to be fully immersed in the task of meaningfully confronting their ethical responsibility in the face of mass civilian suffering.

Actions such as joint statements by the Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER) or even

individual action — important though they were — did not translate into an institutional culture where students could openly grapple with the unfolding genocide without fear of isolation. The arguments for vaccine ceasefires published by a few of my professors last year — also quoted in my reflections — were indeed discussed in the light of preventing epidemiological risk "spilling over" into Israel in a national conference. In such a context, I found it impossible to separate HUJI's academic space from the rest of Israel and view these actions as "balancing".

The professors have accused me of ignoring their efforts to "encourage safeguarded expression" [1] by not mentioning the conflict resolution workshop designed for us international students. I should inform the readers that the workshop touched on the violence in Gaza superficially, relegating it to terms like "complicated". Moreover, the workshop remained largely unstructured and soon drifted towards personal behaviours and in-class tensions on non-specific issues; and did not address Gaza or international war-crimes as such. It is not that I expected the workshop to focus on those aspects, but I feel it is necessary to report what happened in it, since the professors mentioned it.

It is also important to state here that workshops and actions like having a Palestinian student in the classroom do not automatically translate to safe spaces. International students, being in a foreign land, perceive safety and vulnerability differently and their belated expression of their thoughts cannot be unfairly labelled as "self-isolation" and "individual's choice to remain silent" as my professors have done. Professors ought not assume the existence of liberty, simply because they say they are striving for it. They must continuously examine the kind of learning space they are building: one where things are deliberately avoided and put on an "oh, it's complicated" list, or one where those with conflicting ideas actually feel safe to express them. Their letter stresses the trauma experienced by Israeli society after October 7. For a year, I have shared their fear and uncertainty about life. But what troubles me is the asymmetry of empathy. Throughout my academic year in Israel, I witnessed

the trauma of Israelis named, discussed, and institutionalised; while the trauma of Gazans was either backgrounded or reduced to “collateral damage of political acts.” The gulf between the magnitude of suffering in Gaza and the measured, technocratic posture of academia was vast. To note this imbalance is not to delegitimise Israeli grief but to call out the selective visibility of suffering in academic spaces that claim universality. My reflections precisely address the classic failure of intellectuals to provide clarity about an obvious injustice by using phrases like “a more nuanced insight into the intricacies of life and conflict in the Middle East”.

I have also been accused of “misrepresentation” because I did not cite Hebrew-language publications or seek clarifications from professors. I should mention that the heavy online censorship by Israel of anything seemingly anti-Israel was unfortunate, and I would welcome the professors providing the gist of those Hebrew-language publications. However, not citing Hebrew-language publications may render my reflective piece *under-researched* or *perspectival* in the eyes of my professors, but it does not make it, as their response implies, a collection of malicious gossip or a deliberate attempt to malign the university.

Their response has, by implication, questioned my credibility in writing such a reflection. I state firmly that reflections are testimonies of lived reality, and testimony has value in ethical discourse. To not express my dissent would have been to abdicate my responsibility as a physician, a public health professional, and a participant-observer of global academia. My reflections were born out of fidelity to conscience, to what I witnessed, and to what I could not unsee. My anonymous quotations from in-person interactions and my observations on the ethical stand of public health academia, which my professors have found lacking credibility, find resonance in broader analyses too — for example, the recently published essay “*The Shame of Israeli Medicine*”[3], which thoroughly documented how Israeli medical and academic institutions did not live up to the ethics of healthcare.

I acknowledge that some of my words — such as “useless” — were harsh and must not be used in the public domain. I

could have used other words, like “ineffective,” to put forward a larger ethical question: what is the role of universities during atrocities? Universities are not shelters of neutrality; they are powerful producers and protectors of knowledge and legitimacy in a civilisation. When such institutions do not consistently, publicly, and effectively oppose state violence, their silence functions as complicity. My reflections were an attempt to address that.

I am grateful that this exchange happened. I do hope that future interactions on this issue will be through a lens of moral equivalence, rather than of finding “balance” to sound politically correct; and will not reduce my reflections to a mere attack on my university. It must focus on the larger questions that have repeatedly come up in the original reflections and this response too.

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