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## Leadership in Action Report: Reflections on a Psychology & Mental Health Placement in Jaipur, India

Joelle Oki

University of Cambridge



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### Introduction

Spending time in Jaipur on a psychology placement was one of the most challenging and eye-opening experiences I've had so far. I came into it not quite knowing what to expect, but open to learning and I left with a far deeper understanding of what it means to work in mental health, particularly in a context very different from the one I'm used to.

This experience gave me the chance to see how psychological care is approached in a completely different healthcare system, to understand how cultural context shapes both diagnosis and treatment, and to reflect on what kind of psychologist I want to become. I did not just observe clinical work; I also had the chance to get involved in community-led outreach and spend time supporting child development projects. It made me think more seriously about the importance of accessible, culturally aware care, and the many forms psychological support can take beyond the therapy room.

Jaipur itself was an experience of its own. Living and working in such a vibrant, unfamiliar city pushed me to be more adaptable and independent, but also reminded me of how important it is to slow down and listen. I learned just as much from the people I met - from hospital staff to local volunteers to the children I spent time with - as I did from the placement itself.

This report is a reflection on that experience: what I did, what I learned, and why it mattered.

### Who are Vocational Impact?

Vocational Impact are a not-for-profit organisation that offers international student placements in partnership with community-based projects. It operates under the UK-registered charity Arms Around the Child and is regulated by the UK Charity Commission. Arms Around the Child is a global charity working to support orphaned and vulnerable children living in extreme adversity. The charity provides care, education, healthcare, and protection for children affected by poverty, abuse, trafficking, and the loss of caregivers. As a registered charity, Arms Around the Child also carries out fundraising, development work and advocacy in addition to running international student placement programmes like those facilitated by Vocational Impact.

My placement was arranged through Vocational Impact, and I was placed at two local organisations in Jaipur. The organisation focuses on providing skills-based placements for students and recent graduates across disciplines including psychology, law, education and public health. The placements are intended to provide practical experience and exposure to new systems, while also offering support to the local community. Throughout the process, they acted as an intermediary between myself and

the host institutions, helping to coordinate logistics and ensure the placement aligned with my academic and personal interests and values.

### **Life in India**

This was my first time travelling independently as well as my first time visiting the Asian continent, so I arrived with an open mind but little idea of what to expect. I encountered several cultural differences that, while initially unfamiliar, ultimately became some of the most rewarding aspects of my experience.

- One of the first adjustments was eating with my hands, which is a common practice during meals, especially when having chapatti with curry. Although it felt unfamiliar at first, I came to enjoy it and saw how it added a more direct connection to the meal. The food was always flavourful and home-cooked, and I grew to really look forward to mealtimes.
- Mosquitos were a daily challenge. Even with insect repellent, I was still getting bitten regularly! But I quickly learned that this was just part of adapting to the local environment, and I took it in stride.
- The pace of life in Jaipur stood out to me. Having grown up in London, I thought I was used to busy city life, but Jaipur had its own unique rhythm. The roads were especially different, with cars, scooters, rickshaws, pedestrians, and even animals all sharing space.
- Religious and spiritual practices were also very present in daily life. I observed morning prayers, roadside shrines, and patients who sought holistic or spiritual approaches to treatment. This exposure gave me a deeper understanding of how faith and spirituality are still closely linked to healthcare for many communities.
- Out of respect for local customs, I adapted the way I dressed, particularly when entering temples or visiting community spaces. This helped me to be more mindful of the cultural context I was in and showed me the importance of making small adjustments to engage respectfully with different environments.

### **Child Development Programme at FAITH Aalingan**

FAITH (Foundation for Awareness, Inclusion, and Total Health) is a non-governmental organisation founded in 2005 by Smriti Singh in Jaipur, Rajasthan. Through its project Aalingan, FAITH provides shelter, medical aid, food, clothing, and education to abandoned children living with HIV/AIDS, aged between 5 and 18. Originally starting with just two children, Aalingan now houses 28 children, while the wider organisation supports 55 boys and girls. FAITH was the first home in Jaipur to care specifically for HIV+ orphans, offering them safety, support, and a chance at a full life in a society that often stigmatises them. In addition, FAITH runs a programme supporting single mothers living in Rajasthan's slums, many of whom are divorced, separated, or widowed, by providing monthly stipends and ongoing support.

From Monday to Friday, I spent my evenings at the boys' care home, supporting the staff with the Child Development Programme. One of the initial challenges I encountered was the language barrier between myself and some of the younger children. Several of the older children who spoke both Hindi and English, acted as interpreters and kindly helped me learn basic phrases to aid communication. Despite linguistic differences, I engaged with all the children through music, creative play, and recreational activities. Many of the boys demonstrated exceptional musical ability, and I had the opportunity to listen to them perform using instruments such as the drums, keyboard, and harmonica. During playtime, I joined in both familiar activities and local games that the children introduced me to. In Arts and Crafts sessions, I also encouraged self-expression through teaching and supported the children in creating personalised artwork.

### **Psychiatric and Deaddiction Unit at Rajasthan Hospital**

Rajasthan Hospital is a multi-specialty hospital in Jaipur. From Monday to Saturday, I spent my mornings and afternoons working and learning alongside clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, and counsellors, completing 5 weeks of supervised work and training across both the psychiatric and deaddiction wards.

During my time in the hospital, I observed the clinical diagnosis and treatment of a wide range of mental disorders and substance use conditions, guided by ICD-10 diagnostic criteria. I also received one-on-one guidance on the assessment and management of psychiatric conditions. Under the supervision of mental health professionals, I learned to collect patient case histories in accordance with hospital protocols, an experience that deepened my understanding of how cultural, social, and economic factors can shape an individual's presentation and access to care.

A particularly valuable aspect of the placement was the opportunity to prepare and deliver case presentations to the clinical team. These sessions encouraged me to consolidate my learning and reflect critically on my observations. Feedback from the staff not only strengthened my clinical knowledge but also gave me a clearer perspective on the integration of Western psychological frameworks within an Indian cultural context.

This experience broadened my understanding of mental health practice beyond a purely clinical lens, highlighting how cultural attitudes towards mental illness and substance use shape both treatment approaches and patient engagement with services.

### **Conclusion**

My time in Jaipur was more than just a placement; it was a formative experience that challenged me to grow both personally and professionally. Working across two very different settings, a hospital and a community care home, showed me the many dimensions of psychological support and the importance of meeting people where they are. I saw how cultural attitudes, economic realities, and community structures shape mental health in ways that are often invisible from a Western perspective, and this has broadened how I think about what it means to be an effective and compassionate psychologist.

Most importantly, it reinforced the value of culturally responsive care and reminded me why I chose this path in the first place. I left Jaipur not only with new skills and knowledge, but with a deeper commitment to making mental health support accessible, inclusive, and attuned to the needs of the communities it serves.