

Some Thoughts on a More Relevant or Indigenous Counselling Psychology in South Africa : Discovering the Socio-political Context of the Oppressed

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INTRODUCTION

Psychology has historically been conservative in the sense that it operates primarily within the individualistic paradigm. The role of counselling psychologists has traditionally been to help people make informed choices or decisions - without necessarily contextualizing these choices. This aim of facilitating better efficacy in dealing with the decisions in life tends to be undermined when the psychologist ignores the socio-political forces that influence these decisions.

Seen in the light of the need for social change in this country, Psychology, as dispensed at South African universities, has become of mere academic interest since it prefers to ignore the dialectical relationship that exists between individual South Africans and the unique socio-political context within which their behaviour is manifested. In practice psychology

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predominantly serves the needs of a privileged minority whose needs are, in view of the South African socio-political reality, very different from those of the majority. There is within the South African context, therefore, an urgent need for a more relevant or indigenous psychology in which full consideration should be given to the socio-political conditions under which the majority of South Africans are compelled to function.

The writer does not pretend to have the answers, but wishes to share some personal thoughts about psychology in South Africa and the direction it could take.

There is a purposeful absence of any citations, quotations and references from published works which influenced the writer's thinking, as an expression of protest (i) against conforming to conservative, ritualistic practices in the name of science, and (ii) to the fact that some of the relevant literature is banned in this country.

WHAT IS RELEVANT?

A very important feature of contemporary South Africa is the fact that the majority is oppressed by the system of racial capitalism and is engaged at different levels in a liberation struggle against the oppressive structures that maintain the system. An important criterion for the relevantizing of psychology in South Africa would be the degree to which the behaviour of especially the majority is studied within the context of racial capitalism. For example, to discover the impact of political oppression and exploitation on development and functioning and how to go about changing rather than adapting to the oppressive structures. The psychologist does not function within a social vacuum, neither can he claim to be strictly a scientist who is not interested in political issues. Oppressive political conditions

in South Africa are highly likely to influence the mental health of the oppressed adversely (W.H.O. 1983). (The concept "oppressed" as used here refers to the black working-class as well as that section of the middle-class that desires radical changes).

Being a mental health expert, the South African psychologist is duty bound to examine those factors which will promote social change of a kind that will ameliorate the present suffering of the oppressed. This will require the South African psychologist to venture out of the cosy precinct of his counselling room and speak out loudly and clearly, indicating to the authorities and to the public the effects state policies and legislation have on the mental health of the oppressed. Their silence at a time when serious erosion of human rights and mental health takes place can easily be interpreted as condonation of and connivance with the system, or even worse, as a sign of apathy. No matter what inference is made, all are indictments against the psychologist, in view of the ethical codes which he is supposed to uphold.

Eurocentric theories of human behaviour can never be fully relevant to this society as human reality is not the same all over the world - and particularly in South Africa where the majority is still concerned with bread and land issues. Clinical interpretations based on eurocentric theories are problematic when the mental illness of the oppressed is to a certain extent a function of their oppression. The psychologist who thus approaches human behaviour solely from the western perspective will necessarily have to question its relevance in the South African context. Psychology must necessarily be enmeshed in the social reality and must take up issue with the South African reality - which is fundamentally that of a severely oppressive capitalist society. Psychologists will have to

come to grips with the fact that the South African situation calls for a different approach because of the different priorities of the majority of the population. With their supposed concern for human dignity, psychologists need to be active agents in the struggle towards positive change and address the pathologies of this maligned society at the core.

AWAY FROM CONSERVATIVE COUNSELLING

Psychologists within the existing structure of helping will have to realize that different perceptions of reality will result in different ways of interpreting "problems". One cannot refer to specific counselling techniques that should be utilized with the oppressed, but one can speak of specific interpretations of "their problems", as well as specific priorities and actions in their lives. The political nature of the problems, priorities and actions of especially the oppressed is a fact that all psychologists should be intensely aware of. As problems arise in the oppressed communities, for example, detentions, psychologists will have to adapt their skills and be flexible about their roles. Maybe the most important criterion for the role of a psychologist should be the commitment to social change. Such a commitment will at least ensure a better understanding of the structurally created problems of the oppressed.

In order to be of service to the oppressed, it is also essential that the psychologist should share the world view of the oppressed - their hopes, fears, conflicts and goals. This knowledge cannot be attained from traditional literature and media sources. The traditional ingredients of Freud, Jung and Rogers, to name but a few in South African university syllabi, need to be augmented at least with the works of Lambley (1980, 1973), Biko (1978), Fanon (1968, 1977, 1979), Freire (1979) and the World Health Organization (1983).

The committed psychologist not sharing the world view of the oppressed can at least elaborate on his understanding and approximate the experience of the oppressed by subscribing to publications such as Grassroots, Frank Talk, Work in Progress, Free Azania and SASPU National.

It is a fact that counsellors usually come from a middle-class background and the majority of counsellors in South Africa is white. As white middle-class people who adhere to white capitalistic middle-class values it might be difficult for most of them to empathize with the oppressed. Even the conservative middle-class black counsellor might find it difficult to understand the world of the working-class black client. Counsellors should therefore take full cognisance of their own world perception and should perhaps only work with clients whose world-view they share, since such a major difference might impede their functioning and effectiveness as helpers.

TOWARDS COUNSELLING THE OPPRESSED

The most important aspect of a more relevant counselling psychology is that a client's problem should be socio-politically contextualized. This will result in a fundamentally different interpretation than if not contextualized. Instead of only indicating what types of conflict the client is experiencing, he should be made aware how the system in which he is functioning plays or played a role in the development and manifestation of his difficulties. Many so-called personal problems are really an expression of the socio-political context. It is in the interest of this context that people see the problems in their lives as separated and isolated from any shared world. Many of the difficulties over which people go and see a counsellor - such as hating one's parents, hating one's physical features, hating school, having no desire to succeed - may be more intelligible when interpreted within their political context.

In counselling the oppressed, the psychologist needs to work on empowering the client to use his inner resources - to change his external situation. By joining a trade union, a migrant labourer will have more power to bring about better living conditions for himself as well as have more support from fellow workers - therefore, the counsellor should awaken the worker to the advantages of joining the union. In other words, in dealing with the oppressed, the psychologist should not hesitate to be practical, directive and to encourage participation in collective action towards social change. Psychologists have to help facilitate or join progressive organizations and help awaken the oppressed to their inner strengths by allowing them to draw on their mutual power and energy.

Because the system has denied them access to power by excluding them from government positions of decision-making and enforcing servitude, many of the oppressed find themselves in a state of learned helplessness (Seligman 1975). That is, they have come to believe that no matter what they do in an attempt to improve their lot, their responses are futile in the face of such obstacles. The cognitive state of learned helplessness is behaviourally manifested in apathy. An essential aspect of the psychologist's job when dealing with such people, would be to liberate them from this inertia by means of practical strategies rather than to indulge in a game of reflecting feelings - a luxury which can be indulged in only by the affluent. When working with the oppressed, it is very essential that the counsellor stress the praxis of life. The oppressed has to act!!

In the light of the goal of a new social order, the writer wants to suggest very briefly certain guiding principles that could be important to a counsellor of the oppressed if he wishes to be optimally effective in the liberation struggle against oppressive capitalist structures:

- Counsellors typically come from the middle-class and in order to be effective and relevant to the oppressed, they should have the conviction and consciousness to break out of the traditional mould which is very much in tandem with the existing order, even if at risk of victimization and detention. To be relevant as counsellors they have to be radical - judged in terms of the present status quo.
- Counsellors of the oppressed have to realize that the liberation struggle cannot be isolated from the fabric of life for the oppressed. Similarly it is not a role which one does for a few hours each day. What is called for is almost total commitment to the struggle and this commitment has to be reflected in all actions.
- Everything in life should be regarded as political for the oppressed. The idea of being neutral is a myth and signifies noncommitment to social change. People who claim to be neutral are in fact being supportive of the status quo.
- Given the economic situation of the oppressed, private practice would be a misnomer because of its exploitative and selective nature - and consequently the counsellor should seek employment in areas where his expertise can be better utilized for the community - in fact, these counsellors need to have credibility in the eyes of the oppressed and should visit detainees in jail and attend political funerals.

RELEVANT COUNSELLING

Counselling has historically served the function of a "repair shop" for capitalist society. A more relevant or indigenous counselling psychology has to awaken the oppressed to political action. The counsellor should conscientize all clients about the influence that socio-political factors

have on their lives. Counsellors of the oppressed have to help break the psychological chains of learned helplessness and apathy. Clients will awaken to a sense of empowerment and will then be ready for the most important life task : unite in action towards liberation from capitalism.

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