Bourgeois Counselling and Working-Class Clients: Some Problems and Political implications

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During the mid-1970s an organisation which provides short-term counselling to mainly middle-class white clients established a centre in an african and largely working-class urban community near Johannesburg. This centre was established in response to a request from a group of persons living in the township and it was staffed by lay counsellors drawn from that african community. Despite this 'community base' the service in the township was underutilised and the centre was closed after about six years. Of the many factors which contributed to this closure, those of most interest here centre around the organisation's attempt to apply its counselling to african working-class clients in an unmodified form.

Although this kind of enterprise and its eventual failure is by no means unusual, there are still some useful lessons to be drawn from it. Some of these concern basic community work methods and will not be explored in depth

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here. Of more interest are those lessons which indicate that the theory and practice of counselling employed by the service in question were neither neutral nor value-free; that the implicit and explicit values underlying and shaping the counselling contributed to the service's ultimate failure to be viable in its setting. In short, it will be argued that the theory and practice of counselling were so shaped by bourgeois ideology and that the african counsellors themselves were so encapsulated in this ideology that the working-class african clients were unlikely to find the service useful or rewarding.

Going beyond the experience of this service and the lessons drawn from it, it will be further argued that the effort to locate essentially bourgeois counselling in african working-class communities is a politically problematical undertaking. The dangers of infusing bourgeois ideology into such communities through such efforts may not be neglected. The expression of such ideology through the theory and practice of humanist (in the North American sense) psychology and counselling is the focus of this article. Finally, it is suggested that 'progressive' psychologists can benefit from theoretical input from african working-class communities themselves.

The problems involved in providing North American- or European-derived counselling to african working-class clients can be examined through either a culture-based or a class-based analysis. A culture-based analysis would stress the cultural differences between white and african persons and would point to the conclusion that these differences can render a method of counselling ineffective. A class-based analysis on the other hand might start from the assumption that methods of counselling developed by and for members of the bourgeoisie are likely to be less effective when applied in response to the problems which are experienced by working-class persons but seldom by middle-class persons.

As will be seen, a class-based analysis appears to account more satisfactorily for the difficulties experienced by the service in question. Nonetheless, one of the concepts employed by culture-based analyses can, with modifications, be usefully employed. This is the concept of 'cultural encapsulation' (Pederson, 1976; Wrenn, 1962) and it leads, in a class-based analysis, to the understanding that counsellors can be so encapsulated in bourgeois ideology as to 'miss the point' when dealing with working-class clients.

Cultural encapsulation is said to lead a counsellor to perceive clients as if they have the needs and values common to the counsellor's cultural or subcultural group. The clients' own needs and values are not perceived with sufficient clarity (Pederson, 1976; Wrenn, 1968). As a result, the counsellor's interpretations, suggestions and advice may be of little value to clients 'of other cultures' as the counsellor in some fundamental sense fails to understand such clients properly.

The concept of cultural encapsulation was developed to explain the problems arising when white counsellors tried to deal with 'minority group' clients in the USA, i.e. to explain the problems encountered in 'cross-cultural' counselling. It must however be remembered that these cultural differences between counsellors and clients often coincided with class differences as counsellors were usually of middle-class extraction while 'minority group' clients were usually working-class.

In a class-based analysis one would focus on the counsellor's encapsulation in a specific ideology rather than in his or her culture. This focus extends beyond the individual experience (socialisation) and cultural milieu of the counsellor to the nature and functions of ideology and, ultimately, to the material bases of individual experience, culture and ideology. Within such an analysis the ideology which encapsulates a counsellor may be found

to have culture-specific elements, but attention might be more fruitfully directed towards those elements which reflect dominant social relations.

The counselling service in question provides some useful information for an examination of the nature and effects of encapsulation. On the one hand, cultural encapsulation *per se* seems to have been avoided as the counsellors working for this service were drawn mainly from the african petit bourgeoisie and the counselling which took place cannot be described as 'cross-cultural'. On the other hand, the theory and practice of counselling employed are definitely of bourgeois origin and reflect the influence of bourgeois ideology on North American humanist psychology. The training of the african counsellors included their encapsulation into this ideology and their partial estrangement from working-class africans. This encapsulation and estrangement was probably not extensive in 'real life' terms, but it was sufficient to impair the counselling itself.

The counselling practice employed by this service was essentially Roger's nondirective method, supplemented at the level of theory by Maslow's hierarchical system of needs (cf. Frick, 1971, Maslow, 1954 and Rogers, 1942, 1961, 1967). Its primary emphasis was on helping clients to gain insight into their emotions or feelings rather than on helping clients to solve material problems. The counselling was designed to help clients meet their 'actualisation needs' (which correspond to Maslow's 'need for belongingness and love', 'need for esteem' and 'need for self-actualisation') rather than their 'survival needs' (which correspond to Maslow's 'physiological needs' and 'safety needs') (cf. Holdstock & Rogers, 1977, Maslow, 1954 and Rogers, 1961). Implicit in this design is the assumption that 'actualisation needs' are the most pressing needs experienced by the clients. While this assumption can be justified with regard to white middle-class clients, it cannot be generally held with regard to african working-class clients.

Self-actualisation as defined by North American humanist psychologists is an individualistic concern, and this psychology's strong emphasis on the value of self-actualisation reflects the idealisation of individualism in bourgeois ideology. In its adoption of individualism, humanist psychology reveals its neglect of social relations; it neglects the social construction of individuals and the role which this plays in the reproduction of social relations. By locating the solution to an individual's problems inside the individual him/herself, this psychology avoids the challenge of changing 'pathogenic' social relations. It encourages its clients to attain a highly individualistic self-actualisation by means of idiosyncratic self-insights, but not to obtain a socialised self-actualisation by means of social and political awareness and actions. It limits the arena of insight to the clients' feelings about themselves and their experiences, urges them to take responsibility for the conditions they are in and holds out the promise of personal growth. It has, despite its frequent invocation of 'holism', an atomistic world-view as it reduces social problems to personal problems and social relations to personal relationships.

Through its adoption of a humanist theory and practice, the counselling service in question limited its ability to respond to its clients' needs. This is best illustrated through a series of points describing the training of one group of counsellors recruited for this service, with reflections on the needs and problems of the clientele.

1. The counsellors were taught to reflect feelings in order to facilitate insight and personal growth. This type of counselling can be beneficial to persons who are struggling with essentially emotional problems. Its value to people who are seeking help for financial, employment and accommodation problems is unclear, especially when these problems arise directly from the social, political and economic structures and practices of apartheid.

2. The counsellors were taught to avoid providing or attempting to provide direct assistance with material problems. The rationale for this was that material problems should be solved by the clients themselves: the counselling would help the clients to sort out their emotional problems and gain clarity about their situations, and this would enable them to deal with their material problems. This makes some sense when one is dealing with clients who have the material and social-political resources to meet their problems. Many of the clients approaching the service however presented problems which arose from a lack of material resources and from political repression.

3. The counsellors were taught to avoid giving advice as clients were supposed to find their own solutions to their problems. This was a fairly sensible rule as the counsellors might otherwise have adopted an undemocratic and overly directive style. Furthermore, the counsellors were initially inclined to make prescriptions without adequate understanding of the details of the problems or of the clients' wishes with regard to solutions, and the 'rule' against advice-giving helped to counter this. Many of the clients however found persistent advice-dodging to be frustrating and were alienated by it. In addition, many clients were ignorant of the few resources to which they could turn and of the legal constraints attached to these, and required fairly directive input in this regard.

At the beginning of their training, the counsellors were unresponsive to and sometimes resisted both the theory and the practice presented to them. Gradually they were won over and adopted the viewpoints of their trainers. This process was in fact an encapsulation of the counsellors in the ideology of humanist psychology, and it probably succeeded because (1) the trainers appeared to have superior knowledge and (2) the trainee counsellors themselves experienced counselling from the trainers during the training and

eventually found that it worked for them. One may assume that the counsellors were receptive to this process in part because they were petit bourgeois and had something in common with the white bourgeois clients catered for by the parent organisation. By the end of the training the counsellors were themselves partly equipped to cater for a bourgeois clientele but were not equipped to deal with a predominantly working-class clientele. Within a matter of months of beginning counselling work, most of these counsellors dropped out of the service.

One of the reasons for dropping out was the frustration experienced by these african counsellors. They had been trained to deal with essentially emotional problems (or the emotional aspects of problems), had been taught that 'emotional counselling' was the most important aspect of counselling and had been led to expect that 'emotional counselling' would meet the essential needs of their clients. What they in fact encountered was a large number of clients who sought help with basic material problems. The counsellors found that (1) the clients were often not satisfied with explorations of their feelings and (2) they (the counsellors) and the service did not have the material resources to help their clients with these problems. The counsellors from time to time advanced the argument that the clients did not benefit from the counselling because they (the clients) failed to understand it. This argument was surprising because it was so uncritical of the service and its training. It reflected the counsellors' encapsulation in the bourgeois ideology underlying the counselling theory and practice as well as their alienation from their working-class clients.

The mismatch between training and actual work requirements can be further illustrated by comparisons between the types of problems presented by the african clients and by the white bourgeois clients of the parent organisation. Material problems of accommodation, employment, finances, crime and violence were presented by 41,89% of the african clients and by 6,04% of the white clients. On the other hand, problems of depression, emotional

disturbance, loneliness, suicide threats and 'spiritual' matters were presented by 0,89% of the african clients and 20,49% of the white clients. Psychiatric problems were presented by 10,01% of white and 0,29% of african clients, and alcohol and drug abuse by 8,94% of white and 1,18% of african clients. The two groups were similar only with regard to problems concerning interpersonal relationships which were presented by 32,08% of white and 33,04% of african clients. This similarity is misleading however since other research has shown that relationship problems in african families are affected by poverty and unemployment (Turton, 1986). Family problems accounted for 85% of the relationship problems presented by the african clients and 41% of the relationship problems presented by white clients.

To a large extent, then, the african counsellors were presented with problems which they had not been trained to handle. This situation arose mainly through an uncritical application of theories and practices of counselling: at some level the parent organisation assumed that the model it employed with white middle-class clients would be equally useful in the township provided that african counsellors were involved and the problems of 'cross-cultural' counselling avoided. At first glance it might seem that this situation could easily have been rectified: the service should have modified its approach to make it more suited to the conditions under which it worked and the circumstances of its clients' lives. Such an adaptation, however, would have met with several difficulties.

1. *The personalisation of problems.* The humanist paradigm underlying the counselling offered by the service focuses attention on individuals and their problems. This approach is aptly labelled 'person-centred' (Holdstock & Rogers, 1977) and, despite its claim to be holistic, it obscures and ultimately 'relegates out' the wider social, economic and political factors involved in the genesis of personal problems. In this the humanist paradigm is seen to have a passive acceptance of the poli-

tical *status quo* (despite any liberal rhetoric which may be employed). This paradigm would have limited the organisation's attempts to make the service more relevant, and these limitations would have been justified by the 'person-centred' approach's prescriptions regarding the clients' personal responsibility for their situations.

2. *The idealisation of individualism.* Related to the personalisation of problems, the idealisation of individualism further removes the social-structural base from view. As long as the greatest good aimed at is an individualistic self-actualisation through personal growth, the social-structural origins of individuals' problems will remain neglected. As long as problems are theoretically located within individuals, the solutions will also appear to be located within individuals and will be perceived as issues of intrapersonal changes or changes in interpersonal relationships rather than of social changes.

3. *The lack of a community base to the service.* The service in question was physically located in the community but was not created by the community. One result was that it lacked community support and was underutilised. Another result was a lack of theoretical interaction between it and the community, which left the theoretical underpinnings of the service unchallenged and unchanged. A further result was that the service was unrelated to community-based resources upon which it could draw and to which it could refer clients, and it was not in a position to contribute to or stimulate the creation of such resources.

The individualistic paradigm underlying the service's activities undoubtedly contributed to its isolation. It set itself up to help individuals with their personal problems, and expected people to respond on an individual basis to its advertisements of its offers of help. Those

few who did respond were often not impressed and probably did not encourage many others to use the service.

Given its non-directive, non-interventionist, person-centred and individualistic approach, it is unlikely that the service would have been able to adapt successfully to the requirements of its situation in the township. The parent organisation's perceptions of the role of such a service effectively precluded the service from being community-created, community-based and socially active. These perceptions also failed to prompt the parent organisation to undertake preliminary community work with a view to establishing the needs of the community, participation by the community and the degree of support which the service would receive from the community. The parent organisation and its affiliates had found it possible, in white communities, to set up shop and advertise and get good responses from a largely middle-class clientele. It was approached by a few petit bourgeois members of the african community and, trusting the perceptions of these persons, it set up shop in the township. The individuals who requested the organisation to establish this service found the counselling provided to be useful for themselves: this reflected their own encapsulation in bourgeois ideology. They did not represent the community either in terms of the needs and perceptions of its working-class members or in terms of their own positions in community organisations: they acted as atypical individuals and ultimately could not integrate the service into the community.

The discussion so far has suggested that the variant of bourgeois ideology which shaped the counselling service contributed to the service's ineffectiveness in the township. It has in effect been a fairly 'practical' discussion as it has focused on problems encountered by the service. As such, it does not do much more than suggest that other attempts to locate counselling services in african townships should avoid some of the 'mistakes'

made by the service in question. There is however a larger and possibly more important question to be considered as well, namely whether an essentially humanist service should be provided at all (taking 'humanist' in its contemporary bourgeois form). In order to answer this question, it is necessary to spell out briefly some of the political functions and implications of this brand of humanism.

Humanism in general includes among its premises the notion that '"man" is the measure of all things'. The variant of humanism underlying contemporary bourgeois humanistic psychology has effectively substituted 'the individual' for the generic term and 'the centre' for 'the measure'. Thus it stresses the primary importance of individual persons and deals in the propositions that each individual is unique, is irreplaceable, has a unique and special value, has a unique and special destiny. The goal of self-actualisation is based squarely on this cult of individualism as it proposes that within each person is a unique and special personality, set of interests and motives, and destiny which must be actualised. That self-actualisation is theoretically and often in practice asocial (if not antisocial) and idiosyncratic is clear (cf. Maslow, 1954). What is also clear is that self-actualisation is a luxury which depends on the prior attainment of sufficient wealth, comfort and individualistic autonomy (this is clear even in Maslow's hierarchical system of needs). Self-actualisation is, in short, a thoroughly bourgeois ideal and luxury.

The cult of individualism within bourgeois ideology serves to both disguise and maintain the social relations of capitalism. On the one hand it disguises coercive and exploitative relations behind the masks of 'free choice' and 'all persons are equal'. On the other hand it helps to meet capitalism's requirements for competitive, exploitative and selfish 'managers' and a weak and divided workforce. Humanist psychology (a la Rogers and Maslow, *inter alia*) attempts to preserve the cult of individualism while simultaneously re-presenting it in the guise of concern and caring for oth-

ers. It provides a safe channel for caring and concern, a channel which ultimately does not encourage the expression of caring and concern through revolutionary or other activities which might really challenge the social relations of exploitation. It focuses caring and concern onto the 'wounded' individual and away from many of the social, economic and political structures which wound people. It focuses helping into helping the individual lick his or her wounds and away from changing those structures which cause wounds. All of this is rationalised in terms of the centrality of individuals as the primary units of society. It even results in the notion that individual intrapersonal changes or changes in interpersonal relationships are most, if not all, of what is required for social change (this is the atomism inherent in it: the notion that the microcosm determines the macrocosm). Finally, the illusion of 'free choice' suggests that the fundamental structures of society be left alone, since it seems that individuals have freely chosen them and may, when they love each other enough, freely choose to change them in an harmonious fashion (the 'lion' will lie down with the 'lamb').

In the context of an oppressed class' struggle to change the structures of its oppression, humanist psychology presents an ambiguous face. At one level it must be acknowledged that care and concern for others is an essential element of such a struggle. At another level it must be acknowledged that the diversion of too much energy into the care and concern for individuals can be extremely conservative of the *status quo*. The facilitation of highly individualistic efforts for personal growth and self-actualisation is dangerously close to the obstruction of the development of the class unity which is essential to social change. Above all, the infusion of the bourgeois ideology of individualism into the oppressed class is likely to obstruct social change. Members of that class who become encapsulated in bourgeois ideology are in danger of diverting their energies into pursuits which do not properly challenge the *status quo* (the understanding that this may happen motivates the efforts to create an african petit bourgeoisie with a 'stake

in the system' as a buffer between the ruling class alliance and the african working classes).

The question which arises here is whether psychological counselling can infuse bourgeois ideology into african working-class clients. The answer which I propose is based on the understanding that counselling is seldom (if ever) a neutral, value-free helping; it is in fact most often an educative or socialising process. Clients do not only receive help; they also 'receive' the values (ideology) which the counsellor transmits through the interaction. The more the client benefits by or feels benefit from the counselling, the more likely he or she is to adopt values and points-of-view (ideology) transmitted by the counsellor. It is common for clients to adopt the paradigms of their therapists and to perceive themselves and other persons in the terms predicated by their therapists' theories. Thus the answer which I give to the question is yes, counselling can and usually does infuse values into clients and humanistic counselling, based in individualism, can and probably will infuse elements of bourgeois ideology into working-class clients.

This presents 'progressive' persons or organisations which would like to assist african communities develop counselling services with a tricky problem.

At a tactical level, it means having to argue against and sometimes oppose well-intended liberal attempts to provide such services. Liberals are often important allies of progressives and when the latter oppose the efforts of the former, the liberals may become alienated from and accuse the progressives of excessive radicalism, bloody-mindedness and, sometimes, an inhuman desire for fomenting strife through suffering etc. (this can be seen in the anger which many liberals have directed at those 'radicals' and 'revolutionaries' who have so severely disrupted african schooling in recent years).

At the level of praxis, the problem is tricky because it is often difficult to divest one's psychological theory and practice of bourgeois ideology. Psychology is a 'bourgeois science' *par excellence*; it is permeated through and through by a bourgeois world-view and values, which give rise to some of its most basic axioms. One should regard every assumption underlying one's theory and practice, no matter how elementary or 'obvious', with suspicion in this respect. Even basic techniques, which appear simple and so obviously work, need scrutiny. Part of this problem too is the dearth of worked-out alternatives. Criticisms of bourgeois psychology and broad theoretical frameworks for alternatives abound, but worked-out alternative theories *and practices* do not. At present, most progressive persons and organisations are struggling with greater or lesser degrees of success to adapt bourgeois theories and practices, keeping one eye on critical social theory, another eye on the political implications of their work and yet another on the concrete situations of the people they hope to serve. Their achievements do not constitute an alternative and integrated praxis yet, but they are far preferable to uncritical liberal efforts.

One of the difficulties facing progressive psychologists arises from their expertise. It was mentioned earlier that the counselling service discussed above was unable to engage in a theoretical interaction with the african working-class community it hoped to serve and the community was unable to challenge the service's theoretical underpinnings. Expertise may easily become a barrier between the 'expert' helper and the 'naive' beneficiaries. The experts 'know' what psychology is, what the correct methods of helping are. The beneficiaries, who lack the appropriate educative experiences, seemingly do not. (An analogous situation exists in the hostile relationships between the orthodox medical profession and alternative practices such as homeopathy etc.). An exciting challenge faced by progressive services is to open their theoretical preserves to members of working-class

communities and to allow these communities to contribute to and shape theory as well as practice.

This goes beyond the goal of giving expertise (knowledge and skills) to communities. It does not assert that 'experts' do not exist as experts; it does assert that not only 'professionally' qualified experts are experts. As communities develop their own praxes so they develop their theories. Issues which are central to the domain of psychology, such as how persons come into being, are constituted and structured, interact and so on, what their needs and motives are, what is good for them and bad for them, how they can be helped or hindered, liberated or oppressed, are issues equally central to community praxes. Communities do have expertise on issues central to the 'science of men and women'. To the extent that communities are free of bourgeois ideology, so their knowledge and skills may be free of it. The point is not magnanimously to share *our* knowledge and skills with them, but to share in their knowledge and skills as well as giving what is valuable in ours. Which includes allowing them, as experts, to criticise and reshape ours.

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