THE VIEWS OF COMMUNITY ORGANISERS ON THE RELEVANCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PRACTICE IN SOUTH AFRICA

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An increasing number of psychologists are expressing their discontent with mainstream psychology and the role of the psychologist in South Africa. They are calling for a theory and practice 'relevant' to the South African context (Anonymous, 1986; Dawes, 1985; Lazarus, 1985; Moll, 1983; Psychology in Society, 1983).   The heightened level of political conflict in this country has highlighted the dilemmas of the practising professional and thrown many psychologists into a state of insecurity, confusion and self-doubt.   At the same time however, the 'crisis in psychology in South Africa' has produced much positive debate and activity around the 'restruc- turing' of psychology and the development of appropriate social services. Concerned psychologists are re-evaluating their current practice - in response to the needs and demands of a changing society.

Psychology in South Africa has come under attack on a variety of levels. The population of psychologists is predominantly white male middle class, and working mostly with educated middle class people (Jordaan & Jordaan, 1984; Swartz, Dowdall & Swartz, 1986). Furthermore, mental health services in South Africa reflect broader class, race and gender inequalities in the society. Facilities are generally poorly developed, inaccessible to the majority of the population, and have a 'curative' emphasis (Savage, 1979; Solomons, 1979). The field of industrial psychology has been criticised for supporting management through focusing on industrial efficiency and the reduction of conflict, while power structures in industry and the role of trade unions have largely been ignored (Fullagar, 1984). Likewise, in providing vocational guidance and administering psychological tests, educational psychologists fulfil a significant function in the present education system. They contribute to the streaming process whereby, on the basis of academic achievement and 'individual merit', children are allocated to positions in the social division of labour (Psychology in Society, 1983).

The training psychologists undergo has been said to perpetuate an elitist professional ethic and to be based on an uncritical decontextual- ised and imported 'non-African' psychology. This psychology has been criticised elsewhere for tending to psychologise the causes and cures of human functioning and suffering and for neglecting to consider political, cultural and ideological factors (Jacoby, 1975; Lichtman, 1982). Psycho- logy in South Africa has been noted for its lack of critical analysis of the structural conditions which are at the root of many problems considered important to address (Dawes, 1985).

Dissatisfaction with current psychological practice in South Africa

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has led to the search for a socially relevant psychology; alternative
or appropriate practices which respond to the needs and concerns of the
majority of South Africans in the building of a future democratic society.
It is not the aim of this paper to deal with the complex and varied
theoretical issues involved in this process, but rather to present the
findings of an exploratory study (Berger, 1985) which attempted to contri-
bute to the present debates.

The research elicited the views of people involved in progressive
organisations, on the discipline of psychology as practised in South
Africa.   The basic assumption underlying the endeavour was the necessity,
as discussed above, for formulating alternative approaches and modes of
functioning as well as determining the psychologist's position within
the broader democratic movement in this country.

The participants in the study were 20 'community organisers' (13 women,
7 men) involved in different organisations in Cape Town.   They were active
in Christian, grassroots and general resource organisations as well as
trade unions.   While participants spoke in their personal capacities, it
was felt that their experience within the organisations gave them some
insight into the experiences, feelings and perceptions of members of the
communities with which they worked.   The majority of participants had
received some form of tertiary education, while some had fulfilled the
role of 'lay' counsellors.

After discussions with various people involved in community work in
Cape Town, the researcher (S. Berger) made contact with participants.
Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted in a uniform manner
during June/July 1985.   Discussion centred around the following broad
areas of inquiry:

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- links between personal problems and social, political and economic
  conditions

- utilisation of 'helping services' in the community

- views on psychologists and psychological practice

- framework for a 'relevant' practice and future role of the psychologist

- the relationship between psychological practice and political struggles

  in South Africa.

A diary was kept by the researcher throughout the research period in order
to record impressions of the research process during a most turbulent
political time.   Interview responses were content analysed and a qualita-
tive descriptive account of responses drawn up.   It should be noted that
participants' comments are not statements of fact, but rather reveal their
view on the issues under discussion.   A brief report of the main 'findings'
follows.   Certain quotes from the interviews have been selected and are
included to illustrate some of the points raised.

FINDINGS

Political nature of the 'individual's' problems

Participants outlined what they saw as links between broader political
and economic structures and what are usually identified as personal problems
or as 'individual pathology'.   Subjective experiences of anxiety, frustra-
tion and depression were described, and seen as being generated by basic
conditions of poverty, unemployment, overcrowding and lack of recreational
facilities in residential areas.   These, as well as the incidence of
alcoholism, crime and family conflict, were to be understood as people's
responses to stressful situations and extremely oppressive social conditions.
Comments included:

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"Work pressure, high rents really work on a person ... you don't
get mad for nothing"

"Man ... his mind is entangled with family needs ... he becomes
aggressive with his family because he doesn't know how to handle
it"

"Factory work is enough to drive anyone mad ... a lot comes out
as violence in the family".

Many participants stressed a need for an awareness of the political
nature of personal experiences and concerns; this was particularly
important in order to counter feelings of self-blame and powerlessness.
It would facilitate united action to challenge underlying social structures
and would enable people to see that

"it's the way that society has been structured that made them
be where they are, go through what they're going through".

Utilisation of 'helping services'

Participants stated that people would often tend not to seek outside
help but rather to sort problems out themselves.   This possibly involved
an acceptance of the situation as it existed.   Thus it was said that

"people bottle up"; "people accept things"; "people get by".
The point was also made that more basic material concerns were prioritised
and people were more likely to seek help and advice for 'tangible' problems,
that is, more pressing concerns which were related to basic material needs.
They were less motivated to look for what was termed "a shoulder to cry on".
One person said that

"generally psychological problems are secondary ... are not pulled out
as a problem to be dealt with ... other problems take all your energy".

Many participants stated that it was generally felt that there were few
social services available and that there was a lack of knowledge of those
which were.   In the main, people considered professional services to be

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expensive and inaccessible. Nevertheless, it was said that professionals
were frequently regarded and relied upon as advice-givers and problem-
solvers. Organisers indicated that the support systems most frequently
utilised were religious ministers, family members, friends, social workers
and doctors. This naturally depended on the nature of the concern.
Choice of support was also largely determined by whether or not the person
was regarded as trustworthy.

Image of psychologists and psychological practice

The clearest point made was that people have generally had very
limited experience of psychologists and were basically unaware of the
work that psychologists performed. Contact with psychologists appeared
to be limited for two major reasons:

(a) their inaccessibility to the majority of people in Cape Town -
    psychologists were not established in the community; they did not
    actively expose the role they fulfilled and their services were seen
    as expensive;

(b) the nature of their work - psychologists treated 'mad' people and
    middle class people; they did not have an understanding of community
    issued and the concerns of the oppressed.

It was said that

"psychology is very foreign to the community"
"psychologists are not known in our community"
"people won't think of going to a psychologist".

While most people have had little direct contact with psychologists,
they do have certain basic conceptions of what psychologists do, and a
particular image of psychological practice. Most participants stated that
psychologists dealt with 'mad' people. The following statements exemplify

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this:

> "There's the idea of someone coming to treat your mind"
>
> "If you need a psychologist you have broken down totally;
>   you're loony"
>
> "Psychologists care for sick people".

They were therefore seen to deal with severe problems and were to be met
in traumatic situations. They were clearly associated with psychiatric
institutions which had a very negative image. As a result psychologists
were regarded with some caution, and even suspicion.

Most organisers regarded the second major focus for psychological
practice as individual counselling. This was described in terms of the
development of a relationship with clients, listening and talking to them
in order to help them work through personal experiences and problems.
There was some positive feedback about this function:

> "It helps to speak about your problems ... and the psychologist
>   gives you a hearing"
>
> "They help in relieving emotions ... making you stronger".

Many organisers felt however that the way in which this was presently
conducted was not appropriate for or accessible to the majority of South
Africans. It was said that while psychologists could offer assistance
and guidance, at the present time "the oppressed are not benefitting from
psychologists' skills". Psychological practice was seen to aim at a small
grouping of middle class people. Some participants felt that in fact, it
could only address "middle class problems". Statements indicating this
included:

> "Psychologists serve the rich, help them solve their problems"
>
> "Problems in working class areas can be addressed by other people
>   ... don't need psychologists".

It was said that psychologists focused on "businessmen", "the elite" and

"housewives with money". The cynicism with which middle class problems were frequently regarded, became generalised to psychologists through their association with and focus on those concerns. Thus it was said that

> "a lot of middle class people are indulgent about their psycho-
> logical problems"

> "psychologists in private practice are ripping off the middle
> class who have problems or imaginary problems".

The framework of psychotherapy was posed as being a problematic one. Factors such as the cost of therapy and of transport, time involved, regularity of appointments and language used, precluded the involvement of most working class people and made it accessible to only a small grouping. Furthermore, organisers condemned work on an individualistic level when it attempted to 'readjust' people to "fit back into society, into the system".

The issue of neutrality on the part of the professional was also referred to by some participants who felt that psychologists and other professionals could not be apolitical: "There are claims of neutrality but this is a myth".

Psychologists were identified with the privileged and powerful classes in this country, and were perceived to have little understanding of the concerns and realities of the oppressed. Politically progressive psychologists were regarded as the exception.

Framework for an appropriate practice

Various areas of socially useful activity were identified by parti-
cipants. Suggestions included:

- research: for example, examining the ways in which social forces

interact with personal factors; how people are affected by, and respond to, social, political and economic structures, and providing feedback of research findings to the community;

- education/dissemination of information: for example, providing information about stress reactions, emotional disturbances and possible coping strategies, as well as information about existing social services;
- counselling: based on a political analysis of the problem and aimed at empowering people; also including crisis intervention work to provide short term relief;
- group work: for example, involvement with organisations around issues of group functioning and group dynamics;
- training of non-professionals: for example, in areas of counselling and research; providing psychologically-oriented skills training.

More significant than the particular area of activity was the psychologist's approach to her/his work. Participants considered this to be of crucial importance. In this regard, it was suggested that psychologists actively make themselves and their resources known and available to the general public as well as to progressive organisations. "If you don't make yourself visible people don't know you're there".

Psychologists should also attempt to demystify their work and break down the negative stereotypes associated with psychologists and psychological problems. Many participants felt that the psychologist should aim to 'deprofessionalise'. This would involve acknowledging and utilising the more valuable skills while removing the present rigid division of skills and exclusivity in training. It would serve to challenge the existing situation where "professionals tend to monopolise the skills they have". It was felt that psychologists should guard against "seeing themselves as

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Good Samaritans", but rather attempt to break down power inequalities and democratise the professional-client interaction, and to "move with the people and not just help them". Many participants felt that the preferred mode of operating was the collective; that psychologists would be most effective if working within a team.

The issue of credibility i.e. acceptance in the community, was also raised. It was said that psychologists should actively and consistently show their commitment to act in the interests of the community in order to gain credibility "so people trust you and know you're genuine". They could work directly with community or service organisations, or be attached to an established and trusted institution or organisation in an accessible location. "People won't respond if it's alien, use structures they're used to".

Psychological practice and political struggles

Lastly the relationship of the psychologist to political struggles and social change was discussed. Most participants acknowledged the importance of providing immediate relief for the individual in distress. This need not imply adaptation to or acceptance of the status quo but rather the development of coping strategies in order to more effectively challenge the roots of one's problems. Counselling could facilitate the process of "mak(ing) you aware of things ... look(ing) at options and alternatives". However, reflection without action was useless -

"When people reflect on their problem and understand it but the community doesn't have the resources, what's the point?"

Psychological help should therefore be based on a political understanding of these problems and involve empowering the individual through 'reflection and action'. This would enable people to analyse their positions within

the wider context -

"see the total situation and how they fit into that situation
and what their contribution (is) towards making this a better
society".

Participants stressed that it was impossible to remove oneself from
the political situation in South Africa and that psychologists, like other
professionals, needed to define their role and social responsibility in
helping to bring about change in this country. As such it was considered
important for them to use their "skills and insights to strengthen the
democratic movement".

In speaking about the relationship between political activity and
professional work, organisers suggested that psychologists put political
content into their work, engage in general political activity and be
available for consultations and training. However, while the potential
contribution of all helping professionals was considered to be valuable,
it was felt that their limitations must be accepted. Ultimately political
and economic change was seen to be of primary importance because

"you can treat one Johnny today, but there will be ten thousand
more Johnnies on your doorstep until things change".

Research Process

The research process in itself became a significant aspect of the
present study. The socially aware researcher within the academic
environment faces the dilemma of how to conduct a study which fulfils
the requirements of a 'scientific' endeavour but which is also socially
useful. The balance must be maintained between satisfying conventional
criteria for 'acceptable' research within the academic community, and at
the same time being responsible to participants of the study and to other

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social groupings. The issue of accountability is therefore a central one in this context. A further issue touches on the researcher's interaction with participants and the way in which the research and researcher are viewed. In this regard, the need to establish trust and gain credibility in the eyes of participants was highlighted in this study. Some participants expressed scepticism about research in general. One person said:

> "No reflection on you but ... nothing comes of it usually.
> People (are) sick of it ... nothing they will benefit in
> the end."

With regard to willingness to participate, another person stated that

> "people need to know that they have something to give and
> can get something in return."

DISCUSSION

It is possible at this point only to highlight and briefly discuss a few of the issues raised during the interviews. It is important to bear in mind that the present study was exploratory in nature involving discussion with a small (and specific) grouping with a certain political consciousness and organisational experience (although the group was by no means homogenous). The focus was on the 'image' of psychology at present as well as on directions for an alternative approach for South Africa. Most participants felt that the issues covered in the interviews were not usually discussed in their circles and that these concerns were not presently a direct part of the struggles in which their organisations were engaged. It is significant to note that participants spoke about psychology predominantly in terms of <u>clinical</u> work. In addition, many of the general points raised referred not only to psychologists but to all professionals in this society.

Generally a critical view of psychology emerged. It was felt that a more 'relevant' practice could be developed through the actions of progressive psychologists. The responsibility lay with psychologists themselves to define a role and future direction appropriate to the South African reality.

With regard to the issue of professionalism, participants considered professional knowledge and skills as crucial for any society. However, they identified the problem as lying in the monopolisation of skills by an elite grouping. They felt that this tended to foster a dependency on the 'expert' who assumed responsibility for and ownership of the person's problems. This was reinforced by the 'clients' who regarded professionals as advice-givers and problem-solvers offering expert guidance and assistance.

Many people appear to regard psychological disturbance as a 'condition' quite distinct from their everyday distresses and concerns. This point is stressed by Hayes (1983) who argues that the mental health dimension of workers' problems is seen as separate from their daily struggles and is 'given over' to a group of experts. Bannister (1983) in assessing psychotherapy, asserts that it is based upon the transferral of the power to resolve conflict from the community to the professional. It emphasises individuality as opposed to the collective and is linked to an ideology based on the concept of the expert (middle class professional).

The issue of democratisation of the professional-client interaction cannot simply be resolved through the willingness of the professional to discard her/his professional role and 'divest' herself/himself of the accompanying expert status. Though this might be a worthy aim in certain instances, the process depends on the participants, the nature of the interaction, as well as the context and broader power structures within which it

occurs. Swartz & Swartz (1986) have described resistances (by psychologists and 'clients') to this process encountered by some psychologists involved in a particular community intervention. They emphasise the non-rational factors implicated in the power of the expert status. While the issue of deprofessionalism is an important one, caution must be exercised so that, in trying to be democratic, psychologists are not unnecessarily devaluing their professional resources. There is a place for 'appropriate' use of expertise (Swartz, 1986).

Participants' criticism of professionalism also extends to the problem of compartmentalising skills within different professions and drawing distinct boundaries between different areas of expertise and specialisation. This issue points to the functioning of professional associations and organisations which control the entrance, training, registration and practice of professionals within a particular discipline. These structures and controls exist within larger social institutions and broader power structures. Organisers in the present study indicated that professional services should be 'opened up' and integrated into existing community social support networks. This would allow practitioners to challenge the present demarcation of specialist functions and to unite with community workers on different terrains. It would also help to break down the mystique surrounding the psychologist as the professional who deals with 'human behaviour' and 'mental functioning' and with what are frequently regarded as rather foreign and frightening aspects of a person's life. In addition, it would challenge the unequal distribution of resources in this country, making services available and ensuring the dissemination of skills to non-professionals in the community.

'Relevant' approach

Based on the present study, a 'relevant' psychological practice could include the following elements:

- a political consciousness and understanding of the social context within which psychologists practice, and of the effects of broader power structures on their work;
- attachment to an established and trusted organisation or institutional structure in an accessible location;
- use of resources in a collective teamwork approach;
- exposure of skills and resources; attempting to counteract public wariness in relation to psychological services;
- dissemination of skills; challenging the monopolisation of skills by an elite group;
- establishment of trust and credibility as well as showing commitment and accountability, as a basis for interaction between psychologists and the community; and
- alignment with and support of progressive groupings and the democratic movement generally.

Involvement in the struggle for a new social order does not preclude the need to address people's more immediate problems. Crisis intervention and psychological and emotional support are therefore considered to be important. Psychologists could help people to use their own strengths and develop existing coping mechanisms. Political awareness and motivation on the part of the psychologist does not imply that the psychologist need impose her/his values onto a client, but rather allow the person to gain a heightened awareness of personal and particular responses to material conditions and circumstances and thus be better able to make informed choices. This function may best be served by emphasising group and

community work rather than the traditional individual orientation.

The wide use of the term 'relevant' conceals the ideological differences on which various conceptualisations of a new relevant role for psychologists are based (Swartz, 1986). A relevant psychology may be seen in terms of a practice rooted in a critical analysis of the South African social formation. This would involve a reconsideration of fundamentals such as how the subject matter of psychology could be construed, who the target groups of psychologists should be, how professional training (methods, content, focus, etc) would need to be conducted, and which skills and services would be appropriate to South African conditions. The issue of relevance therefore goes beyond purely pragmatic concerns in relation to future practice.

Various initiatives have been taken as a result of psychologists feeling the need to re-evaluate their current practice in South Africa. An example of this has been the formation of OASSSA (Organisation for Appropriate Social Services in South Africa) which has arisen out of a perceived need to respond more appropriately to present conditions in South Africa (in particular the high level of repression). This has seen the beginning of a united and co-ordinated response on the part of progressive psychologists and other people involved in the social services who have established a forum within which to debate, organise and formulate appropriate practical interventions. The recent development of this organisation in the Western Cape area has, we believe, begun to some degree to respond to the problems outlined by the participants in the present study.

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However, there are still many challenges to meet in order to develop a relevant psychological practice in South Africa.

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