Professionalisation as a Moral Concern

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> "We reject ... the whole idea of 'experts' and professionals holding forth on how we should accept our disabilities, or giving learned lectures about the 'psychology' of disablement. We already know what it feels like to be poor, isolated, segregated, done good to, stared at, and talked down to - far better than any able-bodied expert. We as a Union are not interested in descriptions of how awful it is to be disabled. What we are interested in are ways of changing our conditions of life, and thus overcoming the disabilities which are imposed on top of our physical impairments by the way society is organized to exclude us. ..... We look forward to the day when the army of 'experts' on our social and psychological problems can find more productive work".

This quote is from the policy statement of the Union of Physically Impaired against Segregation in Britain (Hales, 1982). It reflects a point of view that in recent years has found more and more support, namely that professionalization is not without its hazards in society. This paper follows this tradition of unease about the effects of increasing professionalization of large sections of modern society.

It is concerned with professionalization as a general phenomenon, and

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not with South Africa in particular. I believe, however, that South African psychologists will recognize very readily how these considerations directly touch upon the growth of the discipline in this country. No prescriptions or guidelines as to how to proceed from here are offered, but Andy Dawes (1986) presented a number of specific local suggestions, while Hales gave three examples of an "alternative" use of professional expertise. Finally, I do not claim too much originality for the arguments advanced here: as the references will indicate, I drew heavily on the work of Bledstein, Geuter, Habermas and Gouldner.

Background

The nineteenth century was characterized by a search for a general knowledge. Likewise, psychology developed mainly as a theoretical enterprize. Wundt's search for a single theoretical psychology serves as a good example: "es gibt nur eine Psychologie". Wundt's well-known contention was that one first had to construct a systematic, general and theoretical psychology before it was possible to have an applied psychology. The search was for general laws governing "mind" or "behaviour", and the work of Ebbinghaus and Titchener was in the same tradition. Thus one can say that academic psychology emerged in Germany in the latter half of the nineteenth century, with little concern for solving society's practical problems.

This soon changed, however,as men like Galton and James McKeen Cattell, and later on Münsterberg, G. Stanley Hall and Walter Dill Scott, concluded that one could do something with psychology. It became clear,

especially in educational practice, that psychology could be useful for its activities. As a result, psychology was converted into a practical and applied discipline.

World War I and World War II accelerated this process of changing psychology from an academic-theoretical to an applied-practical discipline. The work of American psychologists like Yerkes and Terman during World War I for example is well known, and it demonstrated that psychology had something to contribute to the solution of society's problems. The direction of psychology would now change from the search for general and theoretical knowledge to a search for knowledge which is useful to and applicable in society. World War II was especially important for the growth of sub-disciplines like ergonomics and clinical psychology. In the USA, for example, clinical psychology received a tremendous stimulus through the involvement of psychologists in the War Veteran's Administration.

The important point here is that the rapid growth of the applied and practical aspects of psychology created the possibility for psychologists to practice their discipline professionally, and to be more than just academicians at universities.

Professionalization

The concept "profession" normally incorporates aspects such as the following (see Bledstein, 1976):

*A full-time occupation in which one's principal source of income is earned.

*Mastering an esoteric but useful body of knowledge through time-consuming training.

*Completion of theoretical training before entering practice or apprenticeship.

*Receiving a degree or licence from a recognised institution.

*Technical competence, superior skill, and high quality of performance in one's work.

*Embracing an ethic of service.

According to Geuter (1984), the professionalization of psychology as a historical process, includes the following dimensions:

Dimension 1: The institutionalization of psychology as an academic discipline. This refers to the establishment of separate and independent departments of psychology at universities.

Dimension 2: The development of systematic knowledge within the discipline that could be applied. From the many psychological theories and methods, some were more important than others for professionalization - not all psychological knowledge was and is equally applicable.

Dimension 3: The application of this knowledge and the demand for its trained workpower. At certain points in time problems arose in society, which demanded concrete solutions from experts. Parts of the discipline became relevant at the level of the practical solution of socially-defined problems. According to Geuter, psychologists then intervened via the application of their knowledge in those societal problem areas.

Dimension 4: The strategies of the occupational group to have its careers recognized and legitimized. This own activity of the practitioners is often seen as the driving force behind the process of professionalization. Legitimation refers to the attempts to argue the justification or necessity of the group's actions to important addressees.

Dimension 5: The regulation of qualifications and educational policy. When the consumers of scientific products included not only scientists themselves but also clients from the general public, the control of competence became necessary. Thus emerged a state system of licensing or registration to protect the consumers of professional activities from "quacks".

Dimension 6: The prevention of the discipline's professionalization by rival professional groups. Changes in the professionalization of one discipline influenced other professional groups in the network of disciplines. Most of all, they did not want to accede problems within their fields of expertise to other groups. Often a process of struggle and persuasion had to take place, in which groups of people attempted to negotiate the boundaries of an area of expertise and establish control over it (see Freidson, 1977).

Dimension 7: Subjective suppositions of the members of the occupational group. Professionalizing the discipline gives the members a sense of belonging to a high status occupation, of union, but without necessarily creating consensus within the occupational group. More often than not, divisions continue to exist or are created between, for example, academics and practitioners (see Louw, 1987, for an example of a political split in the South African psychological fraternity).

Judging professionalization

In order to evaluate professionalization it is necessary to address the question of the benevolence of the professional actions of psychologists. Two arguments will be advanced: (i) professional practice is at least morally ambivalent; and (ii) it is not neutral or impartial in its interventions.

(i) Under the seductive spell of practice, psychologists are called upon (or present themselves) to assist in solving some of society's problems. An underlying supposition (often given as self-evident) in this is that psychologists' actions help people. Professionals present themselves as dedicated to apply their skills in the service of others, having only the client's best interests at heart. Gouldner (1979) has demonstrated very clearly how this dedication to service and skill does more than just serve the needs of the client: it also contains elements of an ideology. The ideological function of the emphasis on service and skill is to stress the autonomy of the profession, to show how it is separate and independent from business and political interests. By highlighting the value of their skills in the service of society as a whole, the experts are at the same time staking claims to public power and influence in society: "Professionalism silently installs the New Class as the paradigm of virtuous and legitimate authority, performing with technical skill and with dedicated concern for the society-at-large" (Gouldner, 1979, p. 19). A further example of this is the emphasis on more stringent preparation and higher standards of licensing: such increases would on the one hand ostensibly protect the public, but on the other hand it would also restrict the number of practitioners and thereby raise incomes.

What is clear from the above, is that the professionals' activities are at least morally ambivalent (Gouldner, 1979). On the one hand, they claim to work towards the collective interest in a disinterested, impersonal way. In this, they present their technology ideologically as an impersonal and autonomous societal resource. On the other hand, they simultaneously advance their own interests and power, their own guild advantage. This ambivalence is neatly summarized by Gouldner (1979, p. 21): "The New Class's occupational culture is neither the caricature of the devoted professional selflessly sacrificing himself in the service of others, nor is it the stereotype of the venal elite that prostitutes its skills for gain".

As an aside, it can be noted that education fulfills an important role in this, as it imparts the skills and techniques of the profession, as well as the obligation to attend to the welfare of the collectivity. The autonomy of the profession is therefore grounded in the specialized knowledge transmitted by the educational system. Larson (1977) elaborated on why education, particularly at university, is so important in professionalization: it gives the university-based professions the means to control their own cognitive base (i.e. the body of knowledge and techniques, the required training, and so forth).

(ii) The postulation, that both the application and practice of psychology are humane, or at least neutral and impartial, lies at the heart of psychology as a technology and as a profession. The codification (or standardization) of knowledge via university training, mentioned above, forms an important basis for the professional's activity to

appear neutral. It provides a scientific basis to the profession's language and knowledge, and since science appears to be objective and value-free, this is transferred to the profession's knowledge and skills. Hence the superiority of a scientific base for the profession. A good example of how even the skills and techniques of psychologists are not neutral in their application in society, is provided by the relationship between form of therapy and social class. Brinkgreve, Onland and De Swaan (1979) presented evidence from The Netherlands that clients from a low income, low educational, and low occupational background, are likely to receive behaviour therapy; other forms of therapy barely being presented. In contrast, clients from higher socio-economic levels, have a much higher chance to receive interpretive, psychodynamic forms of therapy.

It is, however, possible to examine this issue at a more theoretical level, and Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action may provide the concepts with which to do this.

Western society, argued Habermas, is the product of a rationalizing process, in which our understanding of the world became less and less dependent upon traditional definitions of reality and on religiously sanctioned norms. The concept of rationality is central in Habermas' theory; that is, the extent to which actions or expressions can be criticized; when good reasons can be given or expected for actions or expressions.

Thus our understanding of the world becomes increasingly dependent upon the interpretive actions of social actors themselves. Actors take responsibility to reach agreement on the interpretation of situations

in which they find themselves, through a process of demanding and supplying good reasons for actions or expressions.

Habermas distinguished two forms of rationality which individuals or groups can employ: cognitive-instrumental rationality and communicative rationality. In the world of material things, cognitive-instrumental rationality reigns. It is characterized by the efficient organisation of means to increase one's own advantage. Individuals or groups intervene in the world to realize certain goals, and the only criterion for success is the effectiveness of the intervention, as it leads to further possibilities for control of the situation. Communicative rationality, on the other hand, is a characteristic of the actions of the social actors when they strive towards the goal of a communal ("gemeenschappelijke") definition of the world. In communicative action the intersubjective relation of actors is central, as they negotiate about the interpretation of their situation, and try to come to mutual or shared understanding. On the other hand, if a communicative rationality characterizes the social interaction of the participants, shared understanding is the result.

Thus it is possible for actions to extend the discipline and control over the material situation - if a cognitive-instrumental rationality forms the basis of the actions. This type of rationality, if employed by actors in the social domain, creates further possibilities for manipulation of one group or individual by another. Cognitive-instrumental (or means-ends) rationality entails a repression of ethics, argues Habermas, and the stress on instrumental efficiency has a de-moralizing effect. This will be exacerbated by

possible power differentials between the actors in the interaction. Communicative rationality is only attainable if the only form of coercion between actors is that of the best argument. There must be symmetry in the opportunity that the participants have to choose and execute actions.

One can therefore ask the question: Do the actions of professionals lead to greater control and discipline, or do they lead to a real enlargement of the potential of participants to influence their situation via discourse and argumentation? I believe that this question lies at the heart of the dissatisfaction expressed in the opening quotation to this paper, and closer to home, the formation of alternative associations like OASSSA. Along with Van Hoorn (in press), I maintain that the increased emphasis on application and professionalization of psychology, often in an unholy alliance with powerful social institutions, are at odds with the contribution psychology can and should make to a healthier way of life. Psychology's aim of "prediction and control of behaviour", in an economic order where greater efficiency, productivity and profits are the most important considerations (cognitive-instrumental rationality), is much too close to social discipline and control for comfort.

The theory of communicative action provides another moral warning to the professions. One of the aspects of cultural rationalizing is the establishment of fields of action as professional fields of action. Thus certain fields of action become differentiated from one another, and become independent from the daily communicative practice. Actions and expressions in these spheres are no longer open to communicative

interpretation, as the claims that are made in each of them can only be judged by experts. Those who have the authority, in our case in the form of professional, science-based competence, do not have to argue their validity claims. They can give binding reasons; they are actors with influence. In so doing, they establish cognitive-instrumental knowledge, and jeopardize the reaching of shared understanding.

This forms a threat to the communicative infra-structure of our shared knowledge of a situation, in that it implies a kind of a cultural impoverishment. Forms of knowledge are developed by experts in independent spheres, reducing the extent to which all members of society share in these new cultural contents, and thus fragmenting the everyday consciousness. At a very concrete level, one can see this independence of the professional in the display of their equipment, instruments and symbols. These symbols of the profession (e.g. diploma's on the wall, microscopes, stethoscopes, psychological tests, etc.), emphasize its complexity, its forbidden nature to the lay person. They increase the client's awe, and reinforce the notion that s/he is dependent upon the professional.

The technical language of the professions is another important factor setting the professional apart from the public at large. What Gouldner (1979) called the "culture of critical discourse" is a common bond between members of the "New Class", establishing boundaries and unifying elements. While this makes it easier for members of the professional culture to communicate with one another, it also makes it more difficult to do so with people who do not speak that technical language. Thus it unifies those who use it, and establishes distance

between themselves and those who do not. Those who do not use the technical language therefore do not have equal access to it. The technical language in itself becomes an expression of cultural power (see Bledstein, 1976; Gouldner, 1979). Edelman (1977) used the term "therapy" to give a telling example of the subtle bearing of language on status and authority of professionals: "Mental patients do not hold dances; they have dance therapy. If they play volleyball, that is recreation therapy. If they engage in group discussion, that is group therapy. Even reading is 'bibliotherapy', and the professional literature warns that it may be advisable to restrict, supervise, or forbid reading on some subjects, especially politics and psychiatry. ..... To label a common activity as though it were a medical one is to establish superior and subordinate roles, to make it clear who gives orders and who takes them, and to justify in advance the inhibitions placed upon the subordinate class. It ordinarily does so without arousing resentment or resistance either in the subordinates or in outsiders sympathetic to them, for it superimposes a political relationship on a medical one while still depicting it as medical" (p. 60).

As a discipline becomes professionalized, the divisive issues that it deals with, such as race, capitalism, labour, deviant behaviour etc., are removed from the public domain and are isolated within the sphere of the professionals. The anti-nuclear movement is a good example of a popular revolt against this development: the issues raised by the nuclear industry are not simply technical problems to be left to the experts, but there are also moral considerations in which society as a whole should have a say.

To conclude, the two main thrusts of the argument can be summarized as follows: Firstly, the claim of the professionals that they have unique skills and techniques has a moral ambiguity to it: it contains an element of service to society, as well as an element of self-advancement and self-interest. Secondly, Habermas' theory of communicative action warns against the tendency of the professions to extend discipline and control over groups and individuals, and to remove certain issues from public debate. This elitist tendency contained in professionalization undermines public decision-making, as it stands in the way of a more effective role for the general populace in "the practical discourse of public life" (Gouldner, 1979, p. 39).

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