

COUNSELLING AND EMANCIPATION: TWENTY-THREE THESES

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Introduction

This paper was originally presented to a working group of the International Round Table on Counselling at the 7th World Congress on Counselling held at Wurzburg, Germany in August, 1976. The author is a continuing member of the Round Table which concerns itself with issues which are significant to counsellors from all over the world. The theme of the 7th World Congress was, Counselling: Adjustment or Emancipation.

The counselling encounter is a face-to-face situation in which one person tries to 'help' another. Counselling, being more contemplative than active, does not seek primarily to alter social structures, although they may not be ignored, by any means. Rather, counselling is directed more to the individual as an agent with capacities for reflection, emotion, decision and action, but who is nearly always constrained from exercising these capacities in a full and creative manner.

Paradox: Man creates his social order; the social order shapes man. The dialectic of man and society - of the individual and the other - is endless. Each requires the other; determines and is determined by the other. The paradigm from which counselling operates is dialectical: changing individuals in changing societies.

The basic argument of this paper is that counselling is (or should be) an educational practice which aims to emancipate the individual from dehumanizing restraints. Counselling should personalize rather than de-personalize.

The remainder of this paper is in the form of a series of theses which have not been developed with an inter-connecting logic, but which argue for the emancipatory function of counselling.

I

Counselling is an educational practice. Education in the broadest sense, provides a context for examining counselling as a specific form of educational practice.

II

The individual and his society always exist in some degree of tension. It is in this 'field of tension' that education occurs. Further, it is in this 'field of tension' that issues of freedom and unfreedom arise. The individual who is hindered seeks counselling.

III

Emancipation is the goal of humanistic culture:

The goal of culture is to emancipate man from the forces - physical, psychic, or sociological - which alienate him ... so that he may be helped to become fully himself. Such "personalization" must successfully overcome the two opposite forms of alienation represented by the crowd on the one side and individualism on the other. (Barbotin, 1975, p. 25)

IV

Throughout history educational theorists and visionaries have claimed the fundamental pedagogical ideal to be synthesis of the individual:

The physical, intellectual, emotional and ethical integration of the individual into a complete man... (Faure, 1972, p. 156).

V

Humanistic culture, education and counselling share the common goal of individual liberation and fulfillment: to liberate the individual from restraints: material deprivation as well as the totalitarianism of the 'group' on the one hand, and 'individualism' on the other.

VI

Yet we know that in most modern societies the individual has very little hope of concrete fulfillment. He is hindered by discord, injustice, lying and division on all sides.

VII

One of the most fundamental and pervasive social conditions of modern existence is fragmentation (Bohm, 1970) which shows itself:

in nation arrayed against nation
race against race, religion against
religion, group against group, and
man against man. And in turn, each
man is fragmented into different
and incompatible loyalties, aims,
desires, etc. (p. 160)

VIII

The division of society into classes, the status distinction between intellectual and manual labor, alienation from work and its fragmented nature, social structures that defy economic and political justice, clash of ideologies, and the alleged dichotomies between mind and body, spirit and material - all encourage the dissociation of personality into fragments and frustrate the impulses toward integration, synthesis and wholeness (Faure, 1972).

IX

The individual seldom achieves any strong measure of 'emancipation' at the hands of general educational practice. Slavery does not end, it merely erupts into violence.

X

Specialized educational practices such as psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and counselling have been developed. Each of these educational practices has at least one characteristic in common: They are applied in a remarkably concrete way to the individual. Each has the potential to either emancipate or oppress; to liberate or adjust.

XI

Numerous distinctions may be drawn between psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and counselling, such distinctions have not been in fact, empirically demonstrated (Patterson, 1974). A common educational function is given to each. Each may seek to remove hinderances and augment the individual's freedom; or each may use to adjust the individual and curtail fulfillment.

XII

In humanistic¹ counselling a "solution" is a liberation from some restraint. Of course, just what constitutes a "restraint" is, in part, socially determined and thus implies value. Thus counselling is an activity directed toward a certain value.

XIII

In counselling we confront very basic values: even the question of what is our personal or social reality, as well as the issue of valuing a common reality. There are many avenues open for departing from common reality: fantasy, rationalization, avoidance, deception, etc. Not that such departures are themselves 'unreal' nor may we deny that such departures are at times beneficial to the individual. They are, however, departures from common reality.

XIV

Counselling, like other therapy is an activity which aims at getting the individual to value common reality. This is the foundation upon which responsible choice rests. Personal effectiveness requires an ability of the client to choose and to assume the responsibility for the consequences of choosing.

XV

Counselling is not a process which lobbies for a particular ethic or value. Rather it aims to establish the precondition for any choosing. To the extent that an individual can integrate the external demands which he experiences with his internal impulses and identity, he will have a basis for choosing amongst many alternatives.

¹"Humanistic" counselling is based on the assumption that the individual does have the freedom to create reality for himself and the humanistic counsellor uses methods which do not negate this assumption.

XVI

In counselling we work with a client so that he may have insight or understanding into his dilemmas. Counselling does not value a particular insight, nor specific advice, nor a particular value. Rather it advances the possibility of any and all insight what so ever. As Szasz (1965) has pointed out:

Psychoanalytic insight or understanding may be put to many uses; the choice rests with the patient. Once more this is like giving a tourist a map of a strange city. The analytic traveler may, with a map, orient himself, but not find out where he should go. (pp. 51-52)

XVII

The point of therapy is not merely to interpret life, but to change it; "to give the patient's ego freedom to decide one way or another" (Freud, 1961); "to augment the client's capacity for self-determination and making choices.." (Szasz, 1965, p. 6); "to teach certain strategies that allow one to act more autonomously" (Engelhardt, 1973).

XVIII

The individual is constantly under the shadow of captivity. His life is a tension between autonomy and institutionalization. Institutionalization locks the individual into a narrow range of set responses to the world. Yet we know that institutions can be so designed as to cause alienation or to eliminate it. Counselling must opt for the latter.

XIX

Treated as helpless, one becomes helpless, to act helpless is to become helpless. 'Helping' must negate traditions which promote "helplessness".

XX

The counsellor may obstruct emancipation in two fundamental ways: declare a client's ideas or behaviors to be the result of conditioning; or claim that a client's ideas or behaviors are caused by "secret" internal mechanisms. Both tactics deny the primacy of choice.

XXI

The individual's actions, thoughts, imaginings are not merely arbitrary, nor simply determined. Rather they are purposeful. They reflect his choice and they enable him to act in a world he has chosen regardless of how that world may differ from ours. To ignore this fact is to rattle the chains of imposition.

XXII

Using methods which are distinctly human: humanistic counselling aids the client:

- i. to face the contradictions in his life,
- ii. confirm choice as the basic reality of his life, and
- iii. reflect and act deliberately toward the goals of fulfillment, both personally and interpersonally.

XXIII

Choice rather than compulsion is a possibility for all.

To live is to feel ourselves fatally obliged to exercise our liberty, to decide what we are going to be in this world... Even when in desperation we abandon ourselves to whatever may happen, we have decided not to decide.
(Ortega Y. Gasset, 1932)

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