

Counselling, Scientific Psychology and Phenomenology

Counselling theory and practice constitute a huge and rambling empire. Much of what constitutes counselling theory is taken, either directly or indirectly, from scientific psychology. Especially are the research 'methods' employed in counselling research imitations of those methods fashionable in academic psychology. This means, of course, that the experimental method in its various forms is widely advocated and used in counselling research as a preferred route to useful knowledge about the various aspects of counselling.

My purposes in writing this essay are 1) to critically examine the relationship between counselling and its primary theory source: scientific psychology; and 2) to suggest phenomenology as an alternate theory and method source for counselling.

For more than half a century following its birth scientific psychology held out the promise of almost limitless possibilities. The enterprize of scientific psychology expanded and came to virtually dominate university teaching departments.

As is becoming increasingly apparent, the results of scientific psychology, thus far, are extremely meagre and disappointing, at least with reference to explaining and interpreting the conduct of humans, individually and collectively. What has resulted is little more "than a ramshackle assemblage of topics, techniques and mutually incompatible points of view (Hudson, 1975, p. 5)."

A general theory of psychology as well as general 'laws' of psychology have, alas, failed to materialize. Scientific psychology has developed the experimental method in various sophisticated forms. What is now being recognized is that experiments can

be designed to make full use of all the apparatus for testing significance, analyzing variance and the like, so that logical consistency is demonstrated but with results which contribute little or nothing to 'scientific' knowledge. An increasing number of academic psychologists are questioning the experiment, especially laboratory experimentation, "as a means to describe and comprehend reality" (Gadlin and Ingle, 1975, p. 1003)."

Beyond the criticism being advanced against the experimental method as an unduly dominating feature of scientific psychology there is also appearing in psychological literature a critical discussion of the extent to which the various psychologies - differential, behavioral, social, etc., - have their roots in different social, political, and economic forces (Riegel, 1972, Buss, 1975). Out of the critiques revolving around the domination of experimental methodology and the shaping of psychology by socio-cultural forces, we can pose the question to scientific psychology. To whom and for what is psychology meaningful (Brandt, 1975)?

Counselling, to the extent that it is a psychological endeavor, is an applied psychology. Counsellors, as applied psychologists, aid individuals to solve problems which arise in everyday life. They also, to some extent, concern themselves with the social conditions which give rise to, or at least contribute to, the difficulties experienced by individuals in daily living. Given the present status of theory and knowledge in scientific psychology including its various subdivisions, one wonders just how useful a source psychology is to applied psychologists such as counsellors. As R. G. Taylor (1958) remarked:

"The one thing that the applied psychologist can not and dare not apply is psychology in any of the forms in which it is at present understood (p. 108)." The counsellor (as an applied psychologist) must attempt to solve each new problem in its own terms. If there were general laws of a 'pure' psychology founded on the efforts of 'basic' research, then such principles might be usefully employed by the counsellor. Such is not the case, however.

One of the more destructive effects of the aping of scientific psychology by counsellors is an allegiance to a 'scientific image' of man as opposed to a 'manifest image'. The scientific image of man asserts that the human individual is nothing but a complex physical mechanism which can be, and eventually will be, explained in terms of physical elements and laws. The vast edifice of trait and factor personality theory and psychological testing has been built upon this image.

It is quite clear, however, that this model of man does not jibe with how we experience ourselves in daily existence. In daily life I manifest myself to myself and others as an active agent who plans, thinks, imagines, hopes, fears, remembers, acts, chooses, decides, sees, hears and so forth. The "I", while not submitting so far to scientific reduction, remains obstinately the source and the origin of all human praxis and theory. "I am the root, the first person, and unrelinquishingly so (Paci, p. 129)."

The counsellor's mission is to assist individual human beings in the solution of their life-problems. As a counsellor, the

person I face in the counselling encounter is a living subject, not a complex 'object'. While the model of the individual as a complex system of elements fits in nicely with the natural science paradigm of psychology which has held sway for over half a century, it has seriously restricted the counsellor in his primary task: that is, to understand the individual and his situation and to aid the individual in solving life problems.

I am suggesting that counsellors will benefit from rejecting the "nothing but" image of man and affirming what direct observation tells us: that the individual is a moral agent, has ideas, feelings, and emotions; and always acts in reference to a given situation as he perceives it. The individual becomes "manifest" to us through his expressions and his praxis. One quality of being manifest is uniqueness - always a particular person in a particular situation at a particular time. Further, and paradoxically, a counsellor may always rely upon the "fact" that each client is "a changing individual in a changing situation". Uniqueness and change are the root qualities of the "manifest" image of man.

Many of the "facts" about human behavior which have been expropriated from scientific psychology by counsellors suffer from one or more of the following biases:

- 1) the 'fact' has been concluded from group-centered experimentation rather than the study of individuals,
- 2) the 'fact' has been concluded from studies of populations described as 'abnormal',
- 3) the conditions of study have been artificial; that is, contrived in one way or another to meet the needs of experimental design so that the 'fact' is an artifact,
- 4) animal husbandry: that is, the 'fact' has been concluded from studies of animal behavior - rats, pigeons, dogs, cats, monkeys with the fit of these conclusions to human subjects not always being critically examined.

It can hardly escape our attention that researchers in psychology

generally, and in counselling psychology specifically, have made a fetish of numbers. The method of converting human acts, feelings, ideas and judgments to numerals has been the preferred method of doing research and supporting theory. Unfortunately this preferred method was not in vogue because it offered the greatest truth or because it necessarily fit the phenomena under study. More to the point, quantitative approaches had gained the supreme throne of respectability by confirming the obvious 'scientific' status of one's study. For nearly half a century the academic Realpolitik within North American psychology, has made research into, and theory about, issues of intimate human concern appear to be the province of the mediocre or the misinformed (Hudson, 1973). The same observation, it seems to me, can be made about the field of counselling.

Within the last five years, this quasi-religious vision of scientific psychology has begun to fade. The iron-grip of the experimental method is being loosened and the search for methods, theory and practices which bear more directly on the lives which people actually live is under way. Within the field of counselling especially, we need research, theory and practice which will make sense of what people think, what they feel, and what they do. Most of all we need to shift our attention from a futile search for the 'objective' facts and laws of human behavior to the meaning-structures which people actually experience in their lives. The real test of counselling is whether or not it attends to, and interprets correctly, meaning as clients live it.

This suggests a serious search for alternative methods of research and exploration, one or several of which might bring us closer to personal and social reality as people live it. In breaking out of

the experimental, group-centered research methodologies, especially as upheld in scientific psychology, perhaps we can afford ourselves the humility to consider all sources of information and insight into human meaning and praxis. And at least for a time, despise none.

In the remainder of this essay, I will briefly examine phenomenology as one alternative approach to apprehending social reality - an approach which, I believe, has considerable merit for counsellors both theoretically and practically.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology may be termed a science of phenomena. The word 'phenomenon' is derived from a Greek verb meaning "to show itself". A phenomenon may be regarded as that which shows itself in itself; and this it may do in many ways depending upon just how we have access to it. While a phenomenon may appear in many modes, it always appears as itself and not as semblance. Thus to say 'appear' is to mean 'coming to light as that very thing it is' and not as it 'seems' to be.

Phenomenology refers to both philosophy and psychology. In his famous Britannica article Edmund Husserl (1929) indicated that the task of phenomenological psychology is to investigate consciousness and the many forms of experience. In reference to phenomenology as philosophy wrote that it "is but developing the mainsprings of old Greek philosophy" and suggested that, if successfully pursued, it could establish a universal "science of all possible existence and existences".

In phenomenology, counselling may find a method "for changing our relation to the world, for becoming more aware of it" (Thévenaz, 1962, p. 90)." As an approach, "Phenomenology is the revelation of that which is not explicitly present and evident. Phenomenology's task is to bring to light and to the life of evidence what is hidden, occluded, confused and engulfed in error" (Paci, 1972, p. 78)."

Within the context of counselling, the 'phenomena' which call for our strictest attention are the individual being, or subject (including all aspects of consciousness such as feeling, willing, thinking, imagining, etc.), the relationships between subjects, or intersubjectivity, and the reciprocal influence between subjectivity and the symbolic and material entities of the world.

Behind phenomenon there is nothing. The individual subject is the irreducible source of meaning. Of course at every moment of existence something is hidden and something is in view. As a matter of fact what is to become a fully revealed phenomenon (a person, an idea, an object) can be hidden from our sight. Most phenomena are only partially disclosed. By and large they are covered up, disguised, or hidden. We know this easily from our practical experience in listening, speaking, remembering, touching, and so forth. A phenomenon is always what it is, and nothing else, when fully disclosed. We may say that the counter-concept to phenomena is undisclosedness.

A great deal of what we call counselling is directed toward bringing to light what is hidden, disguised or covered up. Behaviors, ideas, feelings, impulses which have been unknown to the client frequently become known. Thus new perspectives, new horizons, plans of action, and meaning structures are clarified and revised - all of which suggests that counselling may be one way of 'doing' phenomenology.

What Does Phenomenology Promise?

First, it should be made clear that phenomenology is not a replacement for scientific or empirical studies. While phenomenology opposes the wholesale reduction of the individual to nothing but elements, it is not opposed to empirical methods per se. Humans are indeed complex entities with many layers of meaning. Our understanding of humans, their ideas and their actions can profit from a multitude of approaches including empirical. Phenomenology as a philosophical and psychological approach does clearly oppose the idea that any one method, including the scientific, experimental method, is the preferred (or only) mode of study appropriate to establishing the "true" meaning of human behavior.

Spiegelberg (1972) has reviewed the influences of phenomenology upon psychiatry and psychology and has identified four major contributions of phenomenology to the understanding of human phenomena.

1. Phenomenology, by urging direct study of phenomena, has pointed out the destructive effects of reduction. Not being afraid of variation phenomenology aids in the spotting of over-looked and neglected phenomena.
2. By emphasizing the importance of "life-world" and "living experience" phenomenology uncovers new patterns for understanding inter-related phenomena, and elaborates the "perspectival" nature of human existence.
3. By studying "consciousness" "experiencing" and then going further to study "intentionality" "imaginative processes", and "fundamental choices", phenomenology develops insights and hypotheses which can then be tested by empirical methods.
4. By increasing the possibilities of verification, phenomenology makes it possible to test hypotheses in new and enriched ways.

Phenomenology is perhaps well described as an eye-opener approach as well as an approach that helps to keep the phenomena themselves in constant view. In counselling, phenomenology reminds us of Jasper's observation that "An experience is best described by the person who

has undergone it (1963, p. 55)."

Phenomenology and The Counsellor

As a counsellor under the sway of phenomenology, my methodological question is: what can I do to make (let) the client reveal him/herself in his/her many-layered meaning? I know that I am in a co-revealing process. The revealing of the clients various meanings are to be the outcome of our working together, for a time, in the counselling situation. I also know that I will become revealed as I am in that situation, at that time, with that client.

However, it is the client's meanings to which I remain most attentive, for it is the client who has come to me for assistance.

What are my tools as a phenomenologically oriented counsellor? First, my eyes, for I must watch carefully for the embodied meanings which show in movement, posture, gesture, and facial expressions. While hardly a phenomenologist in his conceptualizations, Wilhelm Reich (1949) is an outstanding example of the phenomenological method at work in revealing embodied meaning. Second, my ears, for I must catch the meanings of my client's expressions as he means them. By this is meant that I must be able to listen deeply and empathically. Third, I must be a skillful questioner. My questions must be skillful in that they originate in my client's meanings or partial meanings and not in my own theory of what he is saying. In this way I can help my client bring forth shades of meaning which have been hidden or disguised from him, and from me, until now.

Fourth, I must be able to withhold my judgments or conceptualizations

which are based on previous experience or upon some theory or bias I may have. Only by doing this will I be able to let my client appear to me in the form which he is as himself.

These four: looking, listening, questioning, withholding judgment are the basic tools for 'doing' phenomenology in the counselling situation.

Beyond these basic tools, an important phenomenological tactic is role-playing. Role-playing within the counselling situation is an extremely valuable device for uncovering different perspectives held by the client, for communicating these perspectives, and for developing reciprocity in meaning structures between counsellor and client. Role-playing also can be a means whereby the client "throws" himself forward, imaginatively, into situations which lie ahead. In this way he "readies" himself for what is to come.

Other techniques which can be used by the phenomenologically-oriented counsellor are diary-keeping, meditative-focusing (as used in Autogenic Therapy), drama enactment (such as is used in Gestalt Therapy), a life-line technique, the ladder scale (Kilpatrick and Cantril, 1960), and art activities. Each of these can be used in the counselling situation to enable the client to appear in his various "modes" of being-in-the world.

Counselling and Phenomenology: A Brief Dialectic
It is the task of counselling to release persons--to release them from self-defeating, entangling thoughts and actions, to release

Kilpatrick, F.S. and B. Cantril. Self-anchoring scaling: a measure of individual's unique reality. Journal of Personality Assessment 1960, 16, pp. 163-170.

them toward others and toward aspects of their material world. This "releasement" is a process of developing in a client both a coping attitude toward the daily world of other persons and things, and an openness to the mystery of continuously changing and emerging meaning. Moreover, "releasement toward things and openness to the mystery never happen of themselves (Heidegger, 1966, p. 56)." The counselor together with his client must work for releasement through the counselling encounter. It is also the task of a counselor to facilitate understanding so that a client can experience being understood, can himself more clearly understand his relations with others and his relations with material aspects of his world. Through releasement and through understanding, counselling renders visible for a person what the possibilities for his own personal existence are. Beyond these conditions, counselling is directly concerned with the living experience of persons--their feelings, thoughts and actions. In short, the counselor is himself directed, and directs his clients toward living experience, ... "as the manner in which each existing perceiver lives his body and his world (Spiegelberg, 1964, p. 326)."

Binswanger pointed out that the healing mode is more like deep, genuine friendship than scientific endeavor. Phenomenologically based counselling does not set out to explain the client on the basis of this or that psychological doctrine. Instead, "It understands this life-history as modifications of the total structure of the (person's) being-in-the-world (Binswanger, 1956, p. 155)." Such existential understanding requires that the counselor take the lead in setting an essential we-relationship which is free of deceit, chumminess and

condescension, where encountering in the vivid present is possible, where the ontological request "let me be" can be fulfilled, and where the client can discern what he is not yet and can prepare for becoming just that. The phenomenological approach enriches Jaspers' (1963) contention that the concrete acts of understanding which occur as the counselor encounters his client always are "embedded...(in)... something more comprehensive (p. 307)." This "something" is a never-ending possibility and the labor of the counselor is to release the client toward unending possibility.

R. Vance Peavy
Psychological Foundations Division
January 76

REFERENCES

- Binswanger, L. Existential analysis and psychotherapy. In Fromm-Reichman, F., and J. Morano (eds.). Progress in Psychotherapy. New York: Grune and Stratton, 1956, 144-148.
- Buss, A. The emerging field of the sociology of psychological knowledge. American Psychologist, 30, (October) 1975, pp. 988-1002.
- Gadlin, H., and G. Ingle. Through the one-way mirror: the limits of experimental self-reflection. American Psychologist, 30, (October) 1975, pp. 1003-1009.
- Heidegger, M. Discourse on thinking. New York: Harper, 1966.
- Hudson, L. Human beings. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1975.
- Husserl, E. Phenomenology. Encyclopedia Britannica, 17, 1929, pp. 699-702.
- Jaspers, K. General psychopathology. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Kilpatrick, F. P. and H. Cantril. Self-anchoring scaling: a measure of individuals' unique reality worlds. Journal of individual psychology, 16, 1960, pp. 158-170.
- Paci, E. The function of the sciences and the meaning of man. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1972.
- Reich, W. Character analysis, 3rd. ed. New York: Oregon Institute Press, 1949.
- Riegel, K. F. Influence of economic and political ideologies on the development of developmental psychology. Psychological Bulletin, 1972, 78, 129-141.
- Spiegelberg, H. Phenomenology in Psychology and Psychiatry. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1972.
- Spiegelberg, H. Toward a phenomenology of experience. American Philosophical Quarterly, 1964, 1, 325-332.
- Thévenaz, P. What is Phenomenology? Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962.