

Serious Thoughts About Counselling in Post-Industrial Societies

(rv peavy 05/13/01)

Although there is little agreement on just what it means to be in a post-modern, post-industrial society, there is no doubt that all over the planet societies are in the throes of transformation from traditional cultural contexts to de-traditionalized and increasingly intertwined and complex cultural contexts. Personal and social realities are simply not what they used to be. As the sociologist Anthony Giddens¹ has written, "... (post-)modernity radically alters the nature of day-to-day social life and affects the most personal aspects of our experience". (p. 1). Today, everything seems at question. Beck² believes that the "choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time". (p165).

Many people are seriously conflicted about their vision of what and who they wish to be. Achieving a stable and sustainable personal identity is a frustrating task in post-industrial society. Visions of personal futures are adorned with things remembered from a more stable time, and 'things dreamed of' that glitter in the shopping malls and not-yet-here'. Grandma's apple pie and the newest high-tech gadget are both desired. Inherited recipes about how to live life and pre-set formulas for successful work and family experience have vanished. We must accept that each person's life is an experiment. For better or for worse, a life is a 'project to be constructed'.

People long for a sense of place, for rootedness. Yet this has become a misleading hope. Trees don't walk, people do. Vast numbers—millions and millions—of people think of cities as stepping stones and temporary resting places from which to struggle with both opportunities and difficulties in living in the so-called 'new economic order'. At this moment in history, very few governments and virtually no corporations are enacting necessary policies and providing funds necessary to support adequate social capital. As a result, we have a rapidly increasing proportion of the population of the world experiencing 'ontological insecurity'.

While we may adapt to not having the surrounding authority of community, family, and place, we definitely cannot adapt to the lack of the 'authority of work' (after all, we have a history going back 10,000 years in which work—both in and out of the home—has been a major activity for building and defining self-identity). It is absurd to think that we can do without a fair amount of stability and some security in our work lives. The emerging armies of temps and perma-temps are a testimony to a work trend that largely serves corporate interests and introduces instability and lack of work identity into the lives of legions of workers.

Counselling cannot change society. However, counselling can make a real difference in the lives of people by providing help and guidance in self-creation projects. For counselling is to be a valuable source of help to individuals living in post-industrial societies, critical transformations in counselling practice must occur.

Conventional counselling systems came into existence in the past century. In large part, these 'old paradigm' systems are a product of instrumental reasoning, positivist psychology, and industrial logic. Today we are living in a new context. We need revised and new forms of counselling for making sense of our lives in the new, post-industrial context.

Transformations characterizing post-industrial society are: 1) **globalization**, 2) **migration and cultural interpenetration**, 3) **detraditionalization**, 4) **urbanization**, and 5) **diffusion of technology**. These transformations are on going, and vary greatly from

¹ Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

² Beck, U. (2000). Living your life in a runaway world: Individualisation, globalisation, and politics. In Hutton, W. & Giddens, A. (Eds.) *On the Edge*. London: Jonathan Cape.

country to country. In fact, many cultures are a perplexing mix of the pre-industrial, industrial, and post-industrial. Much of contemporary social life has a liminal quality—neither this nor that.

So what do we need to transform about counselling?

First, we need to shift counselling theory and practice away from psychology that emphasises measurement of traits, behaviors and personality variables to psychology that focuses on context, meaning, stories, action and human face.

Second, we need to change the meaning of 'career' from life-long job to a focus on the individual's life. 'My life is my career' is an appropriate maxim for post-industrial counselling.

Third, we need to understand that the self is not a measurable, physical entity. Selves are symbolic constructions. Selves are configurations of meaning. Selves are constructed through experience and are most accessible as stories that can be given voice. Selves are multi-voiced and are continuously evolving.

Fourth, we need to recognise the social nature of existence. The human is a relational being, not an independent free-floating individual. Who we are and what we are comes into existence largely through joint-action and relationship. Counselling itself is a social practice.

Fifth, we need to concentrate on assisting persons to recognize and develop capacities. The greater the range of capacity a person has, the more choices he or she can make. This is the meaning of personal freedom. To gain a new capacity, or to improve an existing capacity is to enlarge one's sphere of choice and freedom.

Sixth, we need to visualize counselling as a complex of cooperative activities. The helpseeker brings his or her life experience to the counselling session. The idea of 'guided participation' helps explain counselling cooperation.

Seventh, we need to recognize that all counselling is culturally defined—there is no 'one best method' of counselling.

Eighth, we need to face up to the fact that all good counselling is 'personal'. Counselling is a specialized meeting between two or more persons for the purpose of finding individualized solutions to specific problems. Counselling requires a 'human face'.

Ninth, we need to define counselling process and practice in holistic ways. When a concern is presented in counselling, the individual is asking: "How should I live my life?" This is a philosophical and moral question. It is a question that implicates the 'whole' person. There often is, and should be, a specific focus to the counselling conversation—i.e., employment, conflict, health, family concern, work life, etc. None-the-less, the help-seeker is always intimating: "I don't know what to do next, I am not sure how to proceed in my life".

Tenth, we should act to promote and protect a suitable vocabulary for counselling. A counselling vocabulary should emphasize:

1. **Construction.** Selves, relationships, identities, societies are constructed and co-constructed through learning and responsible action.
2. **Agency.** A person is an *agent*—an actor. To act in an agentic way is to act with meaning, purpose and intention. Positivist psychology gave us an image of people as machines, robots, things, conditioned behaviour emitters, bundles of behaviours and habits. Constructivist psychology and philosophy gives us images of people as self-creating, morally responsible, co-operators, meaning-makers, protean, and social actors.
3. **Possibility.** The new paradigm for counselling urges the use of possibilism, potentiation, capacity, personal strength and responsibility—both personal and social. This is in contrast to the old paradigm counselling which employs diagnostic categories, labelling, concepts of psychopathology and deficiency.

4. **Human beingness.** People are not 'resources', nor are they 'objects' to be shaped, conditioned, bought and sold. It is a category mistake to regard a person as an object. The ability to choose, act and enter into relationships define what it means to be a human being. The vocabulary of counselling should not be colonized by terms taken from 'business language', 'pathology', or by psychology that stresses behaviour and cognition to the disadvantage of action choice and feeling. The counselling process is a human face-to-face engagement.
5. **Respect.** Whether face-to-face, group, or technology-mediated counselling should always convey respect: respect for self, for other, for personal experience, and for authentic processes of helping.

Old Paradigm Counselling	New Paradigm Counselling
Career as life-long job	Career as the course of life
Evaluate by tests and inventories	Use of storied descriptions of experience to evaluate
Interests defined by tests	Interests defined by life experience
Counselling as behavior changing	Counselling as meaning-production
Self is defined by measured traits	Self is narrated (autobiographical self)
Self as a stage process	Self as a zig-zag, evolving process
Self as individual psyche	Self as social, culturally defined being
Self as marketable object	Self as co-constructed, multi-voiced subject
Counselling as intervention	Counselling as self-creation
Counselling as expert system	Counselling as cooperative endeavor
Counsellor as objective professional	Counsellor as bricoleur with a human face
Reference to rules and standards	Validation of personal & social experience
Vocabulary of deficiency and Pathology	Vocabulary of possibility and capacity
Efficiency and effectiveness and Commodification as prime values	Agency, responsibility, expanding choice and capacity as prime values

New paradigm counselling counsellors need knowledge of, and capacity with:

- Dialogical communication
- Life space co-investigation
- Guided participation, openness to cooperative learning and androgogy
- Self-creation processes
- Self observation
- Selves as constructed, autobiographical, voiced and enacted

- Cultural tool use(especially metaphor, story, questioning, visualization)
- Use of technology as a tool in support of self creation
- Recognition of contextual perimeters and responsibilities