Les actes du CONAT
2000
NATCON Papers

SocioDynamic Perspective and the Practice of Counselling

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Introduction

Historical note

The development of SocioDynamic Counselling[1] began with the publication of two articles emphasizing that counselling should be revised to place greater emphasis upon creativity, and co-operation between counsellor and help seeker, and upon acknowledging of the importance of context in counselling (Peavy 1974, 1977, 1978). The term *SocioDynamic Counselling* was first published in a Swedish pamphlet (Peavy 1988). Since 1988 more than fifteen articles and four professional videotapes (Peavy 1994, 1995, 1996a, 2000) describing and demonstrating SocioDynamic Counselling have appeared. In addition, a SocioDynamic counsellor's textbook has been published in English (Peavy 1997a), Danish (Peavy 1997b), Swedish (Peavy 1998), and Finnish (Peavy 1999). A SocioDynamic trainer's guidebook (Peavy, in press) is due to be published by RUE in Denmark early in 2000.

SocioDynamic (constructivist) counsellor training courses are, or have been recently, offered in Canada, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Portugal, Spain, Romania, and Estonia. Constructivist career counselling courses in counselling are currently offered at George Brown College in Toronto, Canada.

The SocioDynamic method of counselling has been successfully used with unemployed steelworkers at various sites in Canada, First Nations help-seekers in British Columbia and the Yukon, at-risk youth in Toronto, and with immigrants and refugees in Denmark and Sweden. In addition, this form of counselling has been used with a wide range of typical help-seekers in various locations—especially at employment and labor-market counselling offices in the Nordic countries.

Why develop a new form of counselling?

Why is a new form of counselling needed? A short answer to this question is: because the very nature of everyday life is changing in a postmodern world. Institutions ranging from the family to the transnational corporation are altering. Rapidity of social change, the disappearance of traditional habits and values, the displacement of science as the grand narrative of our time, and globalization under the impact of the microchip are powering a shift from certainty to uncertainty in social life. Postmodernism "radically alters the nature of day to day social life and affects the most personal aspects of our experience" Giddens 1991, 1). The postmodern society is a globalized world,

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united by current and evolving technologies into "an instantaneous, twenty-four hour information world" (Jencks 1996, 50).

Most modernist forms of helping claim "scientific" status. This claim is largely a pretense (Fancher 1995; Peavy 1996). Counselling has developed under modernist premises that a problem can be defined by an expert, and a solution designed by the expert to "fix" the problem. A further assumption is that counselling should be subject to the same criteria of efficiency and cost effectiveness that characterize economic production processes. These assumptions tend to convert counselling from a process serving needs of individuals to a process primarily serving the needs of institutions and the omnipresent "market."

In the last fifty years, counselling has achieved professional status. A profession has four essential elements: it is specialized (members are experts), firmly bounded, scientific, and standardized (Schön 1983). For the professional, technique is paramount. Problems are defined in technical terms, and techniques are applied in order to resolve the problem. This paradigm for problem-solving is referred to as technical rationality, or instrumental rationalism. It has three basic components (Schein 1973): (1) a knowledge base, (2) an objectification component (diagnosis, treatment, applications, techniques, strategies), and (3) a skills and attitudinal component (performance and delivery of services to clients based on scientific and application knowledge). In technical, rational society, the role of the expert in defining a problem is paramount. The expert selects the "important things" to see in a problem situation, and then applies techniques to fix the problem. This assumption supports advisory and prescriptive aspects of modernist counselling.

A postmodern perspective finds many flaws in this way of viewing people and their problems. First, scientific knowledge is no longer the omnipotent determinant of "truth". Second, it is increasingly recognized that experts often disagree and are, at times, simply wrong. Third, technical rationality is depersonalizing. The focus is on technique, objectification, and generalization, not on the qualities of the person. Fourth, instead of being clear-cut, most human problems are characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity.

An additional reason for developing a postmodern form of counselling is that counselling developed in close liaison with psychotherapy, clinical psychology, and psychiatry. Distinctions

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between counselling and therapy tend to be blurred. The vocabularies of pathology, abnormality and deficiency that were developed in therapeutic psychologies have been enthusiastically taken up by many counsellors and are commonly found in counselling texts.

This confusion between counselling and therapy is extremely unfortunate. Most help-seekers do not come to a counsellor to be cured of anything. They come for clarification, support, and hope, and are searching for opportunities to increase their capacities. An assumption within the medical model is that the therapist has a responsibility for curing. This assumption should not apply to counselling. Counselling is a learning process, not a curative process. It is very important to separate counselling from therapy and from what Schuster (1999) refers to as the psychopathologization of everyday life that the therapy promotes. From the point of view of SocioDynamic Counselling the principal goals of counselling are (1) to increase the capacity of the help-seeker to pursue goals that she values (freedom of choice), and, (2) to increase the help-seeker's capacity to participate successfully in social life (freedom of action).

The SocioDynamic Perspective: A Philosophy of Helping

A spanning perspective

The SocioDynamic perspective is both a "spanning" perspective and a philosophy of helping. It spans, reaches across and utilizes concepts from diverse disciplines including philosophy, theories of learning, sociology, cultural studies, psychology, linguistics, feminist theory, and economics. However, it is not dominated by any single discipline. This perspective is not eclectic; it is mutualistic and liminal. Mutualism refers to the condition where concepts from different disciplines resonate with one another in a mutually beneficial way. However, the different elements do not lose their distinctive qualities by being combined eclectically.

Liminality: Postmodern personal existence and social invention

Liminality describes the situation of individuals and perspectives in transition, the socially dislocated, or those who are on the margins (Morawski 1994, 53–71). Liminality refers to the "betwixt and between." It is the condition of paradox, of "being both *this* and *that*"(Turner 1977, 37). To be at the *limen* is to be at the threshold.

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Liminality is experienced by immigrants, refugees, the unemployed, Aboriginals, criminals, adolescents, and many others who live on the cusp of uncertainty and ambiguous circumstances. Liminality also describes the situation of many counsellors in the postmodern context. It also depicts the status of those who evoke new perspectives and paradigms. Liminality implies transformation and new positions in social life; for example, the transformation of counselling practice to a new position of resonance with postmodern existence.

Constructivist themes in the SocioDynamic perspective

The SocioDynamic perspective is generally constructivist. The constructivist claim is that individuals, alone and together with others, construct the distinctly human world. Selves, relationships, institutions, societies, and cultures are socially constructed. There are various versions of constructivist thought, two of which are especially important to the SocioDynamic perspective: philosophical constructivism and coconstructivism.

Philosophical constructivism is based on the assumption that human beliefs, perceptions, and values are strictly human constructs. Philosophical constructivism is anti-essentialist, envisions multiple realities, and uses images that are alternative to those used in the positivist and objectivist sciences.

Philosophical constructivists do not deny that there is an "out-there" reality. They claim, however, that it cannot be directly grasped. We do not discover symbolic reality; we construct it. What we know can be conveyed or instilled only by diligent perception and linguistic communication. This means that any guidance given to others necessarily remains tentative and cannot attain the status of "truth." Suggestions and advice that the giver intends to be helpful, and solutions that are offered, can be interpreted only as provisional and temporary. Advice and suggestions have the status of "best guess for now."

From the constructivist view, ambiguity is a pervasive and largely uncontrollable condition of postmodern life. The constructivist claim is that it is fruitful to take ambiguity as a good starting point for the exploration of a problem. Entirely new and local solutions often result from investigating ambiguity. In the context of SocioDynamic Counselling, expertise shifts from the professional knowledge of the specialist and scientist to the local, best-guess cultural knowledge of the *bricoleur*.[2]

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Under the influence of constructivism, the SocioDynamic counsellor assumes that help-seekers are interpreters of their own and others' experiences. Even more important is the claim that meaning is made, not found. To reiterate, the constructivist view, which acknowledges ambiguity, uncertainty, and multiplicity, resonates with postmodern conditions of liminality, unpredicability, and indeterminacy.

Neo-Vygotskian coconstructivism[3]

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky(1978) held that the human mind is primarily social in nature. The Vygotskian view is that knowledge is cultural and mediated through interaction—that who we are, and what we learn to think and do, result from coconstruction.

Counselling can be described as coconstruction *par excellence.* Counsellor and help-seeker, through their use of cultural tools—especially language tools—negotiate with each to clarify, articulate, and interpret the help-seeker's situation that causes concern. In the counselling meeting, the participants negotiate and use dialogue to coconstruct understanding, agreements, choices, and plans of action.

Human face: A philosophical interpretation

When counsellors present themselves as superior, professional, objective experts, or as advice-giving officials, or when they are indifferent to the plight of help-seekers, counselling easily becomes degradation. The status dynamics are those of an expert and a dummy. An antidote to such degradation can be found in the concept of the "human face."

"Face" is the most fundamental manifestation of presenting ourselves to "others". In our encounter with the face of others, especially strangers, we come to feel our existence as moral beings. Facing another brings on a sense of obligation, responsibility, and the moral necessity to recognize and respect the other as both unique and infinite. The other is not a client, category, classification, case, or object. The other is subjectivity and possibility. Authentic face-to-faceness is intersubjectivity and personal encounter, and not an objective exchange of facts and opinions between two robotic information processors.

To see the other as an objectification is fail in our moral responsibility to encounter another as a distinct, unique, human person. Objectification does not serve the best interests of the

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other. The importance of face is beautifully described in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas (1985).

Levinas's concept of the human other is based on a partial forgetfulness of myself. I must forget myself so that I can face the other as the other, and not as an object that I must deal with in order to carry out my duties. Face implies taking a stance of ethical regard for the other. The concept of human face underscores the importance of both personal responsibility (choice and action) and social responsibility (ethical regard and care for the other). A human face is open and heart-felt, rather than closed, to the other. The concept of human face is an antidote to the anonymity, indifference, condescension, and lack of concern that tends to characterize individual existence in bureaucratic, technological, consumer society.

How Is SocioDynamic Counselling Practised?

Beyond having a philosophy of helping, counsellors also need procedural knowledge (know-how) in order to transform the philosophical ideas into practice. The rest of this article briefly describes some of the practical concepts and procedures important in SocioDynamic Counselling.

Practical definition of SocioDynamic Counselling

SocioDynamic Counselling is a general method of life planning. It facilitates learning through the use of cultural tools and coconstruction. Further, SocioDynamic Counselling aids help seekers to increase their ability to participate in social life. By social life is meant work, family, cultural identity activities, leisure, and lifestyle preferences, as well as activities related to health and spiritual affirmation.

This approach is also a holistic counselling method and resists the partitioning of counselling into many sub-specialties. The help-seeker always appears before the counsellor as a whole person and should be respected and guaranteed the distinction of being perceived of as a distinct, whole person in the face-to-face counselling situation.

Reframing the meaning of career

The concept of career in SocioDynamic Counselling is extended beyond work and employment to refer to one's life or personal existence. Each person has a personal existence in which work plays an integral part. Choices, plans, capacity building, and attending to other issues and features of work life are considered

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as alterations in one's personal existence. One of the meanings of dynamic is "characterized by an aesthetic equilibrium of parts which, considered separately, becomes unstable." A life or personal existence is a dynamic, complex system. Personal existence is an individual's fundamental career.

Counselling process and relationships

The counselling process and relationships are interactional achievements. Both processes are constituted through negotiation of the cultural knowledge that counsellor and help-seeker bring to the counselling meeting. The counselling conversation is marked by dialogue and interpersonal negotiation. The counsellor brings knowledge of how to articulate human experience and the help-seeker brings the experience to be articulated. Hand in hand, they investigate the help-seeker's life space, or those aspects of the life space that concern the help-seeker. Working together, counsellor and help-seeker negotiate, critically reflect, and co-interpret unde- rstandings. Their shared knowledge forms the basis for invented solutions.

Narrated self, authored life, and life space

A trio of concepts—narrated self, authored life, and life space—form the principal working concepts of SocioDynamic Counselling. Narrated self refers to the claim that individuals "narrate" multiple selves. Narrated selves are characterized as fluid, evolving, inter-connected, and subject to unending revision or re-authoring. This concept is in sharp contrast with psychological model of the "psychometric self," in which the self is assumed to be a stable, measurable, quantifiable entity composed of enduring traits and variables. From the SocioDynamic perspective, individuals reveal *who* they are, *how* they are, and *what* they are, through the stories they tell. Literary work is a model for the emergence of storied selves (Bruner 1986).

The Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin is a primary source of ideas on the authored life. "The text (written or oral) is the unmediated reality (of thought and experience). Where there is no text, there is no object of study" (Bakhtin 1986, 103). Autobiographical oral and written texts—these are the narratives by which we reveal our lives (Bruner 1986, 15). Oral texts are the stories that we tell each other in our daily lives as a means of understanding both others and ourselves. The counselling process is a linguistic device for telling, hearing, and interpreting stories. The dialogue of counselling is composed of fragments

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of stories, partial stories, and, sometimes, whole stories. Dialogue is also a questioning and answering about the meaningful interpretation of stories and the implications of stories for action.

The concept of life space is derived from the ideas of Kurt Lewin (1948), especially his notion of social space. As a person participates in experiences that have a common focus—learning to garden, for example—the complex accretion of all meaningful aspects of the experience (of gardening) becomes configured in the consciousness and memory of the individual. At some point the individual is able to speak with authority on gardening and has the right to name himself a gardener. The life space refers to all such configured meaning systems that a person accrues as a result of life experience.

These meaning configurations interact and provide the basis for a person's ability to narrate his life stories. A life space is a semantic network in which a person is embedded and it is available through attention and memory. A person's life space contains all those meanings (of people, experiences, objects, relationships, events, and so on) that the person has aggregated so far in life. A life space is like a hotel in which many voices have taken up residence. Depending upon the occasion and the orientation of the individual, different "residents" may give voice. Together, the counsellor and helpseeker investigate the help-seeker's life space and narrated selves which reside there. To do this, they use story, dialogue, and other literary devices such as mapping, drawing, and metaphors. Counsellor and help-seeker critically reflect on assumptions underlying story elements. The concept of life space is a partial replacement for the concept of self. Life space turns the counsellor's and help-seeker's attention to the context, to narrated selves, and to the dynamics of life authorship. Focus on the life space also discourages exclusive and narcissistic concern with self and self-feelings which tends to characterize some forms of modernist counselling.

Self-observation

Self-observation is an essential feature of helping (Guidano 1991, 103–8). When encouraged to articulate and interpret her stories, and when guided in mapping her own life space, the help-seeker achieves greater clarity. When engaged in critical reflection on her own assumptions, values, beliefs, and experience, the help-seeker assumes different points of view

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with greater ease. Also, the help-seeker is enabled to grasp and articulate complexity in her life. This lays the groundwork for more adequate self-appraisal, better life planning, and conditions of hopefulness. The help-seeker becomes better able to construct and actively pursue the goals and futures that she values. Self-observation also helps the individual replace vocabularies that pathologize and victimize with vocabularies to use in constructing vistas of possibility and in constructing successful pathways to cultural participation.

Summarizing comment

The year's doors open, like those of language, toward the unknown.
Last night you told me: tomorrow we shall have to think up signs, sketch a landscape, fabricate a plan on the double page of day and paper.
Tomorrow, we shall have to invent, once more, the reality of this world.

—— *E. Bishop*

ENDNOTES

1. SocioDynamic Counselling is a registered Canadian Trademark.
2. The term *bricoleur* refers to a "Jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it-yourself person" (Levi-Strauss 1966, 17). A *bricoleur* produces a *bricolage*—a close-knit set of local practices that are effective for inventing solutions to concrete, practical problems occurring is specific circumstances. "The solution which is the result of the bricoleur's method is an emergent construction" (Weinstein & Weinstein 1991, 16). A counsellor-as-bricoleur works cooperatively with the help-seeker. They use the materials at hand—life stories of the help-seeker, and combined cultural knowledge of counsellor and help-seeker to construct sensible solutions. A solution is an emergent coconstruction, not the result of applying preset prescriptions and interventions, nor is it a "tinkering" with techniques.
3. Vygotsky is one of the originators of theory about coconstruction. A contemporary account of coconstructivism places ideas of social construction and constraints of external reality in a mutual relation (Speed 1991; 1994). Coconstructivism has also been placed in a narrative framework (Pocock, 17: 149–172). SocioDynamic Counselling assists help-seekers to construct better stories and more useful interpretations of the aspects of life space that they are concerned with. Although external reality cannot be known directly, the value of stories and resulting actions is strongly influenced by their "fit" with the unknowable "out-there" reality. The coconstructivist position is that of exercising "best-guesses" rather than

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relying on strategies based on expert knowledge that allegedly meet the criteria of being scientifically verifiable. The constructivist is willing to settle for what truth might be and what the various versions of truth are, rather than insisting on the need to verify, through scientific methods, what truth is.

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