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The Helping Professions and the Brave New World

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Each year psychologists publish an annual review of current research. It was not long ago that achievement, anxiety, and authoritarianism were the major areas chosen for investigation. Today the high interest areas are conformity, social desirability, acquiescence, powerlessness, and coping behavior. This rapid change in the focus of our attention has intimate roots in the larger culture.

The world in which we live has undergone rapid social change. Our traditional values have somehow become outmoded and obsolete. The reasons for this change in values lie in urbanization and mechanization which foster dependence upon an invisible economy. We have institutionalized discontinuity in our individual lives and changes in jobs, geographic residences, and spouses orient us toward the present time. The past for each one of us becomes blurred by these discontinuous roles, residences, and occupations. As we live in the present, the here-and-now becomes all important. It makes less difference what we did yesterday or will do tomorrow. To the extent that individual accommodation occurs, there is less foresight, planning, and anticipation of the consequences of our own acts. There is less responsibility toward one another and more preoccupation with our individual persons.

Material possessions come to replace personal relationships. In a social environment characterized by transience, objects have more permanence than other persons. We are also rewarded for possessions by the approval of others while the only reward for personal relationships is
intangible and internalized. As persons we have become less caring since caring implies responsibility and intact relationships with others. By being uncaring we are protected from the internalized consequences of being hurt or guilty in human contacts.

The cost of this new culture to the individual is in a relative impoverishment of inner life and human relationships. Access to one's own feelings and convictions and those of other persons is increasingly difficult. The label for this condition is, of course, depersonalization. And the philosophy of explanation is found in existentialism which describes the current human dilemma and offers a modus operandi for holding on to the present and thereby retaining some personal meaning for one's own life. In so far as we have assimilated these new values, we are also plagued by these new problems.

Not too long ago the helping professions espoused psychoanalysis in a one-to-one relationship between psychotherapist and client as the panacea for human woe. Now this must be amended to read an ameliorative for woes which arise from problems in persons who have retained traditional values, largely an older and less willing-to-be-helped generation. For these persons it does make sense to put past and present back together once again. Understanding can be a touchstone to recreate a continuity of experience which puts old ghosts to rest. And in so doing the day-by-day world becomes tolerable and even comfortable.

For persons with new values, the new problem is one of retaining meaning in the present, in the minute-by-minute tasks and relationships which compose a day. For these persons the past is already gone and no amount of psychoanalytic search can recreate that which has never existed for them. The professional helpers offer group psychotherapy, an exercise
in becoming like selected other persons. Or there is behavior-shaping, the removal of unwanted behaviors by conditioning or desensitization, by manipulation of rewards and punishments. A more direct route is provided by existential treatment which focuses on decisions as they occur and the control that one regains over his life by means of these separate decisions. These therapies have in common an attention to overt behavior, a preoccupation with technique applied to surface conditions. The contrast between old and new therapies is between surface and depth and wherein lies the personal relevance. Human depth is becoming an oblivion which in ceasing to be important may literally cease to exist.

The gist of the argument becomes increasingly clear: a changing culture changes man, the helpers and the helped alike are caught in a common net. More subtle than this circle are the changes in the professional technical tools used to describe persons. And this is a paradox: the tools we use create the description of man with which we live, but the tools themselves are created by the culture which also shapes man. What this implies is that we find what we look for in human beings, regardless of what really is there. In fact, the question of what really is there ceases to be relevant, since we can only discover the content dictated by the tools we employ.

In the last century the poet Swinburne credited man with putting God in Heaven. Projective techniques, especially the Rorschach, and psychoanalysis as a personality theory may be responsible for human psychodynamics as we have come to know them. In other words, our psychological tools for understanding man reflect the contemporary state of the culture. We investigate a blurred mirror-image at one frozen instant
of time. That we choose to crystallize this likeness and to make it relatively permanent does not mean that man is really as we have caught him in vivo but it does mean that he will be seen and caricatured in this manner.

The image that emerged during the early part of this century was of Freudian man beset by his past and valiantly trying to come-to-terms with his aggressive and sexual instincts within a repressive culture. Anxiety and guilt were the hallmarks of conflict. The culture gradually became less repressive of human sexuality, less Victorian, and more restrictive regarding individuality. Old-fashioned creativity was harder to retain or to come by; new fashioned creativity was defined by scientific innovation in the service of control over the physical environment.

Even the wonder, joy, and play of our children has changed; they become sophisticated and intellectualized beyond the capacity of their childish experiences. They use words to control their parents into doing things for them. The family car is at their early disposal as taxi and later for their priority usage. Perhaps the contrast here is between control or manipulation and appreciation or emotional contact with the environment. Today's child reaches out to use the stuff of his world while yesterday's child was filled with delight that he could partake and participate with his world. The Boy Scout virtues of yesteryear have vanished into that invisible gulf between generations. And these virtues may not be simply recalled for this is not within the scope of our individual or professional powers.

The new value rubric calls for personal identity, the pursuit of personal relevance or meaning on the one hand by a testing of the stuff of life. Experimentation in relationship, feeling, sexuality, occupation,
marriage is part of the desire to retain control and direction over life. This experimentation involves risk-taking and a sustained discontinuity of person, place, and emotions. It invites casualness and impersonality and dictates new virtues of activity, movement, material possessions. In fact, these are all facets of one's coping success and they define the extent of personal control over one's own life and the milieu. This differs from sheer concern with power for its own sake; this personal power exists and is fostered in the interest of self-preservation. Power is the preventative for loss of control over the sequence of decisions which define personal meaning and ultimately personal existence. The alternative for the individual is not lack of power but alienation in which there is anergia, lack of motivation, and the despair that comes from realization that nothing one is or can do ultimately makes any difference to anyone even to oneself. This new value endows human life with desperation, provides a thrashing and thunderous quality to social acts, and makes necessary a public demonstration of effort to remain intact.

At the other pole the culture exerts pressure for conformity (homogenization into middle-class postures), for suppression of affect ("playing-it-cool"), rationality (control of the world by intellectual means—the "smarts"), and security ("get what you can now").

The dilemma of the younger generation is a how-to-do between a Scylla and Charybis which both contain possibilities for unlimited terror. The value of personal identity runs squarely counter to the virtue of social conformity. Beginning in Berkeley, the students protested the attempts of the superuniversity to homogenize them, to teach them en masse
an educational content that made no sense in terms of their personal search for meaning. Then the draft and forced participation in a war in Vietnam which was offensive to their ideals of self-determination, individual responsibility, and the freedom of the individual to choose his own way of life. The Americanization of Asia, or any place else, is not a popular pasttime for college youth. The expressions of protest become increasingly intense, militant, and violent. Involvement in militant protest for Negro civil rights is part of this same quest for personal meaning: the Negro must be integrated in order to have equal opportunity to pursue his own personal identity. Social justice is the servant of individual freedom to explore the world for one's own purposes.

Society, by the hand of amorphous legislative fathers, admonishes by fiat and punitive counterviolence. The students meet violence with violence because they are not created in the Freudian image of man which calls for suppression of aggression. They publicly proclaim their rights to individuality—and love-ins, drug usage, the hippie society become the extreme reaction to pressure for social conformity.

This generation does not have a different problem. It is merely the form of the problem which differs. How to become acculturated and still retain individuality? How to function within society and still to be a person? It is this question that the helping professions must seriously address themselves toward. Wherein lies professional responsibility?

That we are professions concerned with persons and yet professions which call themselves sciences provides an added problem. Modern science has contributed to our dilemma. The demand for objectivity, one hallmark of modern science, means that we impose a set of limiting constraints between ourselves and everything else. Objectivity is distance from raw
experience, a detachment of man's intellect which provokes distrust of sensory data. As a direct consequence the physical environment and the worlds of other persons have come to exist separately from ourselves and from the scientists. The self is set apart and imbued with special importance. Since there is increased reliance upon the self, there is also self-consciousness and self-doubt.

Thus in dealing with human problems professional persons attempt to be objective and thereby dehumanize their clients and patients by this very act. The opposite tactic would seem to be necessary: a humanization procedure which comes about as a result of an emotional investment by the helper and implies a reduction of intellectualized distance, a greater reliance on primary sensory data and our feelings about these data. Both projective techniques and psychoanalysis are now relatively neglected as tools because they do require a suspension of conventional, scientific objectivity and a reliance upon subjective, personalized experience. In addition, these tools tend to recreate man in terms of a Freudian image which no longer is faithful to man.

The helping professions need to retain a modicum of identity, integrity, and humanity while relinquishing or drastically modifying their tools. These tools contributed to the development of individual professional identity simply because of their continuity and stability of usage over time. What we do in our daily routines does determine what we are as professional persons. By repetition and habituation of our practices, personally meaningful skills and activities are acquired. To the extent that we practice these professional skills with consistency and predictability, we contribute to our own integrity. To the extent that professional persons retain some perspective on themselves and an
awareness of clients as individuals like ourselves, their own humanity is served.

What does this mean for the practice of our helping professions? The helping professions have increasingly turned their attention to overt behavior and its modification. This is a safer enterprise than a looking-within someone else which invites and demands a simultaneous looking-at oneself. It is both personally safer and more scientific or objective. The preoccupation with behavior signifies that man can be treated or manipulated impersonally and with detachment from any personal risk of self-involvement.

However, the content of the presenting problems and the hang-ups have changed toward those very behavioral events and interpersonal exchanges which are amenable to manipulation. This is the circle: both the helping activities themselves and the nature of the problems or human dilemmas to be helped have changed as the culture has changed. The result is that professional helping acts to abet the cultural demand for conformity and generally runs directly counter to individual pressure for a self-directed search for personal identity. The youth who protest in their zealous and often frantic search for personal meaning and their own individuality are not likely to find solace from the professional helpers. Not are they easily reconciled to accept the total package of conformity, suppression of affect, rationality, and security. Their defiant limbo while it is only a temporary stance for many does entail a loss of the discipline and the acquisition of skills to be used in the furbishment of their own futures and simultaneously in the development of personal meaning and identity.
Thus, the current helping techniques are generally ill-adapted for the solution of contemporary problems in living. These techniques, by-and-large, are destructive of individuality. Helping techniques must protect the individuality of persons while exposing them to possibilities for effective life within the culture as it now exists and as it can exist as a result of their own efforts. Social change and individual change are partners in personal experience. The students who participate in social action whether for civil rights or against war are coming into direct contact with raw experience. They are forced by society to be physically and psychologically equal to their convictions. In this crucible and especially during the late adolescent years identity is hardened by exposure to one's own feelings and the discovery of the person one can become. Identity stems from continuity of experiences and relationships with direct feedback concerning the value of one's own feelings and experiences. The college years are special in that intense experience does leave a mark upon character. Intensity must often substitute for continuity over long periods of time.

These are delicate matters, moral in nature, and dictated by conscience rather than professional codes. Do the helping professions owe allegiance to the maintainence of society as it now exists or is there a commitment to a process of growth and change within the society? To the extent that primary allegiance is to the status quo, then adjustment or resocialization becomes the professional helping. However, the helping professions should lead rather than follow by being less encapsulated by the prerogatives of the current world and thereby exempt from being unwitting agents of socialization and conformity.

Questions of absolute standards and knowledge of the necessary conditions for human development are raised as soon as the helping professions
presume that they have special prerogatives to keep a critical eye on the culture of which they are but a minor constituent. However, there are absolute standards for humanness. We do know what are distinctly human characteristics as opposed, for example, to temperamental qualities shared with other species. The entire history of our species has created a set of shared behaviors, sentiments, and values which define the person of integrity or character and genuine responsibility. We all recognize a caring, honest, open, undefensive person whose integrity is evinced by even a brief encounter.

We must invent new tools for describing man. These tools should emerge from an image or theory of man which allows for a description of both the present human condition and the reflection of what he can become. Since we are going to find what we look for in man, we should look for contrast. Description against a standard for human development is the only safeguard against a loss of our professional integrity by the persistent demands of the culture for here-and-now adaptation to an imperfect society.

It is thus no accident that the research effort undergirding the helping professions is devoted to conformity, social desirability, acquiescence, powerlessness, and coping behavior. By the same token our helping efforts are gradually but perceptibly becoming more restricted to manipulations of behavior, relatively independent of the person, and designed to promote social conformity. Both research and practice attest to our growing acceptance that the man in the mirror is merely the sum of our overt acts. He is what we see and we see what he is; surface without shadow, present without past, feeling without caring, behavior without value, person without identity or integrity. This man in our mirror has no future as a human being. Whether the helping professions are going to be equal to the task of salvaging man's present as they once did his personal past will determine whether or not there is a future for people like ourselves.