Joel Badaines

Humanistic Psychology and the Social Services-Any Hope?

When Hans Lobstein asked me if I would be interested in writing something about Humanistic Psychology (HP) and Social Services I quickly replied in the affirmative! "Why not", I thought to myself; another article, and flattered at being invited to contribute. Then began the struggle - what to write about, how, even why? Hans suggested something about humanistic psychology's future influence (if any) on the Social Services. Then began the difficult problem (for me!) of getting a clear description (definition felt too "anti-humanistic") of HP. I also hoped to be able to assess HP's potential for influencing social services (SS), with all its problems, needs, and approaches.

HP is often described as being concerned with humanistic potential for growth and positive change, and an individual's awareness of herself. Bugental (1967) suggested that the ultimate goal of HP is the preparation of a complete description of what it means to be alive as a human being. It will include an understanding of love, pain, fear, hope, and man's place in the universe. But HP goes beyond descriptions, for it is concerned also with how a human being's experience may be enriched. An extension of this view involves helping people to grow more fully towards fulfilling these potentials. And, in contrast to most other psychological theories, HP views people as acting on their world, changing with it. Thomas (1964) in describing this existential attitude, suggests that human beings are in a constant state of becoming, capable of change through awareness of themselves.

Cantril (1964) offers several characteristics of human nature, but only those relevant to this discussion are included here. He suggests that the individual is hopeful that his/her world will increasingly correspond to his/her own vision (which is also always unfolding), and do not easily resign themselves. Secondly, humans not only have the capacity to make choices, but are eager to do so, in contrast to passively awaiting the environmental factors to act upon them. It follows from this, that human beings must have the freedom (in a psychological sense) to exercise those choices if they are to obtain maximum satisfaction.

Cantril postulates that we must all experience our own sense of dignity, integrity, and identity, much of which can be developed through positive interactions in reference groups. If we fail to find this confirmation in one group, then it is likely that one will seek out new contacts or become alienated if one should fail in that endeavour. Finally, and perhaps most significantly for this discussion, we must be confident that the society in which we live holds a fair chance that at least some of our dreams can become a reality. Thus, effective societies must allow for satisfaction of these needs in the broadest sense possible.

As I sit safely at my desk, hidden away from all the people in social services, I am speculating about their response to the above. I fantasize that some will be indifferent, some will despair (out of frustration, but in basic agreement); others will be angry – suggesting I'm in an ivory tower and that it is an impossible task for SS to try to create the kind of ambience suggested in the above, nor their responsibility to do so!

And, based on my two years as a group-work specialist with an Inner-London Social Service department, I'd probably agree with all of their reactions.

In a report submitted to the Dept. of Health & Social Security in 1973 by an Inner London Borough, it was stated that their principal objective was: "to assist people with their emotional, personal and social problems by the provision of a range of services including social work, home helps, and other domiciliary care together with residential and day care of a high standard for persons who are unable to receive appropriate care in their own homes." While other objectives were included in the report, one other is of relevance to this paper: "to mobilize all community resources both statutory and voluntary to meet needs, prevent social breakdown and improve the quality of life in the Borough."

If one skims the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970, (which is the Act of Parliament which outlines the functions of S.S.), it mainly involves helping to over-come certain kinds of deprivation or "deficits" although some preventative work, especially with youth is encouraged. They will also provide protection for the aged, needy, or infirm. Thus S.S. are likely to become involved with battered children, or with broken down families. S. S. will also staff day and residential facilities for the mentally ill, handicapped, the very young and the aged etc. The 1970 Act requires very little in terms of helping people reach-out towards actualization or growth. This has very important implications for S. S. because it means that generally speaking, S. S. must first meet their statutory requirements (described briefly above) before they can begin to think along humanistic lines of growth. (It is often as if S. S. had to bring people from a "deficit" position to a "neutral" position before the "plus" can begin!) There is some hope, however. Quoting from the 1973 report; "Perhaps the most significant change observed in recent years is that the S. S. are now seen not merely as a means of propping up social casualties or dealing with crisis that threaten family breakdown, but as a positive attempt to secure social betterment, as a means of improving the quality of life and of preventing the human waste and suffering that so often accompany social problems. This is particularly so of service for children and young people for it is clear that severe deprivation at an early age frequently appears in succeeding generations. The provision of good quality social services is one of society's means of breaking into the vicious circle of deprivation and social malaise but to perform this task they must be based on a philosophy that is dynamic and therapeutic and which not only changes with the times but of itself encourages change."

And in the same document, the possibility of enlisting outside organizations. to develop special forms of help for work with families is mentioned, but unfortunately not until the future.

So, there are hints that some S. S. may be in the process of shifting their emphasis slightly, or looking at new resources; but, then the question remains, is it likely to be along the lines of humanistic psychology; and can humanistic psychology do anything to hasten the process or its direction?

On the negative side, HP theory and training are rarely found in the more established centres of social work training. Thus, if it is to happen as a result of internal pressure, social workers will need to obtain training resources. The problem here is that those who make the decision regarding who gets what money for training purposes are unlikely to approve funding for (as an example) a course in Encounter methods or Bio-dynamic Therapy. Senior social workers who allocate their financial and person-hour resources are more likely to give support to courses in traditional family therapy or familiar growth methods than the newer humanistic therapies.

Similarly, S. S. have had to think of conserving limited resources such that humanistic values may be respected, but neither money nor social work hours (a highly valued and often over-looked limit in developing programs) can be allocated to humanistic projects because of the over-whelming statutory requirements that must be first met.

Another factor restricting the influence of HP in the S.S. is the HP model itself. Laslo (1964) in a paper presented to the American Psychological Association quotes Freud: "The moment one inquires about the sense of value of life, one is sick." Laslo argues: ". . .once man achieves a *fairly regularly full belly*, this is exactly the kind of question he does ask." The problems that social workers often face however, are frequently at or near "the empty belly" level. plus, the problems where HP can be so effective may not necessarily be the ones that social workers initially face.

Social workers are often seen as the expert by their clients, and frequently as omnipotent as well. Therefore the client approaches the situation with an abdication of choice, control, or freedom and responsibility. Because of the nature of the problem, especially in the case of battered children, humanistic values such as self-responsibility and "make your own decisions" may have to give way. A hospitalized patient became irate with me when I suggested that I did not have all the answers – that she had to make some choices. She demanded to see someone who was "competent" to "help" her (as she saw "help"), and apparently felt slighted at my turning the questions back to her.

Finally, many of the methods and approaches of HP (especially what is often referred to generally as "the new group therapies") have inherent problems for the types of client-groups that have the most frequent contact with social workers. A report by Zuborsky (1971) summarized many factors influencing the outcomes of psychotherapy. (Note: Some of his findings may not apply to humanistic psychotherapies, but most described below seem generally applicable to the clients and groups that might be found in S.S.) His findings:

1. Patients (P) with higher initial intelligence do better in psychotherapy.

2. P. with higher anxiety at the beginning of treatment are more likely to benefit from psychotherapy. (This is probably so because it indicates an openness for change and motivation for therapy, based on the belief that it will lead to a reduction of anxiety).

3. P. with higher social achievements are better suited to therapy.

4. Therapist's empathy and similar qualities are facilitative.

5. Greater similarity between therapist and patient is associated with better outcomes. These include social class, interests, values.

Thus, a working class, non-British mother with low (functioning) intelligence, minimal anxiety and low motivations for a group experience led by - white, middle-class articulate social workers using "strange" techniques ("talk to that pillow as if it was your depression" etc.!) is going to have difficulties with humanistic approaches. Here special skills are required of social workers that demand imagination, patience etc. as well as a high degree of competency and experience with this kind client group (or any other special group).

My writing was just interrupted by a phone call which provides a lovely introduction to the more optimistic side. It was from a social worker in a hospital asking about possibilities for training in psychodrama for herself and her colleagues. This is one way that the training problems can be overcome; individuals obtain it for themselves, begin a group, in SS and "the word" gets around. A foothold is gained, and if seen as useful, then the approach is likely to become more acceptedwithin the organization such that more people are supported in their training requests and additional doors are opened to humanistic approaches.

It is probably in this way that HP will bring its greatest influence to bear. It is no longer unheard of, especially in the hospital settings, that "outsiders" are invited in to demonstrate, teach, and run groups along humanistic lines. Unquestionably, there is resistance, leaders often have to "prove their worth", but at the same time it is opening the door that much more!

In the near future it is unlikely that social work training programs will be well-represented by humanistic psychology. This need not be too disconcerting in that institutional acceptance is not necessarily a guarantee of creativity nor competency. Increasingly, more people from the S. S. are finding their way into experiential and training groups in the humanistic psychology field. They are bringing back to their S. S. their enlightenment and their excitement; this is bound to spread upward (it often starts at the grassroots!) and outward in the Social Services. And, the humanistic practitioner may well be more dedicated because of the obstacles that s/he had to overcome.

Another factor that may facilitate an increasing role for HP in the S.S. is the problem of resources and their allocation. As resources become more scarce, and as established methods prove less effective than hoped, new approaches will be sought. This is already evident in some S. S. as they begin to value group-work and family therapy approaches. If HP can modify its methods and adapt itself to cope with some of the specific problems indicated in Zuborsky's findings, the potential is there for an increasing role in S.S.

And while there is a strong "status-quo" element in many S.S. there is also the desire for some S. S. departments to be seen as "forward-looking". They may be willing to experiment with newer methods, and again, if successful, or seen as "prestigious", the idea will spread!

So far I have been writing about HP as a method, and its potential influence on social work approaches. But I also see HP in a slightly different light – as an attempt to genuinely understand what it means to be human. It can also be a philosophy and a guide for approaching human problems and situations. Here I feel lies the greatest need for HP's influencing the S. S., but I am also most pessimistic. It would require not only a change in many of the basic approaches to social-work-client relationships, but also a change in the hierarchical system. Even if this were to occur, the whole concept of responsibility would need to change, and because of the nature of the problems that social services must cope, HP may not be the most practical nor feasible system in these situations. Finally, some of S.S. requirements are set by law which may be in conflict with "you are responsible for yourself!" etc. (Note: because of lack of space, I am reducing a very complex set of issues to just a few lines – the reader must bear this in mind!)

But let me end on a more optimistic note from Carl Rogers: "I thing that HP will be playing an increasingly larger role in the thinking of young people, especially young behavioural scientists. I believe we are, and I hope that we will deserve to be, the 'wave of the future.' "

References

Bugental, J. "Changes that is man." In Bugenthal, J. (ed.), Challenges of Humanistic Psychology. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1964.
Cantril, H. "The Human Design". Individual Psychology, 1964, 20, 129 – 136).
Lasko, A. "Psychotherapy, Habits and Values." Paper presented at the American Psychology Association, 1967.
Luborsky, L., et al. Factors Influencing the outcome of Psychotherapy: A review of Quantitative Research," Psychol. Bulletin, 1971, 25, 145 -185.
Rogers, C. "The Process of the Basic Encounter Group". In Bugenthal. J. (ED.), Challenges of Humanistic Psychology. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1967.
Thomas, H. "An Existential Attitude in working with Individuals and Groups." In Bugenthal, J. (Ed.), Challenges of Humanistic Psychology. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1967.