THE SELF-AWARENESS MOVEMENT —A PAPER TIGER

by

Alan Frankland

Recently Chris Scott attempted a critique of what he called the "Seven Pillars of SAM Wisdom". (1) This article is critical of Scott's idea of a revitalised "me decade" and the creation of the "Self- Awareness Movement" and examines each of his analyses of the Seven Pillars showing that with the exception of the section on responsibility, his arguments are severely flawed and his evidence weak.

SAM and the "me decade"

Scott argues for a sociological perspective in counselling yet his initial social analysis fails to prove that there is a real resurgence of interest in self-awareness and group activities analogous to that of the period described as the "me decade". Perhaps **he** cannot distinguish between the tendency towards therapy and encounter of that period and the present developments in women's groups, men's groups, racism awareness and assertion work, but the experience seems radically different: in the letter groups consciousness raising is aimed at the discovery of mutuality and solidarity rather than to wholly individualised "awareness" which so easily became an end in itself, replacing real growth with trendy narcissism. Organised growth activities are different in kind then, and they are probably also fewer in number: it is their novelty that brings them to attention rather than their popularity. One exception, though, might be Re-evaluation Counselling whose self-conscious community **might** also be seen as a movement. Is Scott's article merely a disguised attack on Co-Counselling?

Explicitly the notion of the Self-Awareness Movement has a broader focus, although Scott fails to demonstrate sufficient sense of unity round a set of central beliefs to justify the use of the term "movement". Rather than tackle the various theoretical models that counsellors use to inform practice, he creates the slightly sinister notion of a movement, which on inspection turns out to be somewhat spurious. Still, each of the so-called Seven Pillars are accepted by some counsellors, so the commentary on them should be reviewed.

Back to Nature

In this critique of the fundamental Rogerian view that "persons have a basically positive direction" (2), Scott seems to be confusing Nature

in the Romantic Wordsworthian sense of childlike pastoral simplicity, and nature in the idea of human nature - a statement of the fundamental characteristics of human beings. Scott does not fall into the empiricist trap in seeking to clarify this issue, but claims a moral maturity and breadth of experience greater than that of any who continue to accept the Rogerian belief, which he sees as "more than a little naive" (3) and, with Clare, asserts that it is "disingenuous not to say superficial to relegate the horrors of the human condition . . . to social conditioning" (4).

Perhaps it is part of human nature to respond within the framework of self-understanding that we experience during socialization (5), so that if there is an encultured belief that people will operate within a negative framework, then they do so - it becomes part of their nature, although not necessarily immutable. Perhaps Scott's clients and friends continue to convince him of the basically negative direction of human-kind because he remains committed to a culture that maintains a cynical certainty that that is all there is in their nature.

One aspect of human nature that seems incontrovertible, however harshly we judge ourselves, is that human beings learn a lot and learn fast and their learning has profound effects on their perception and hence what they may learn in the future (6). It is not clear why this kind of learning chain cannot provide an adequate explanation for the individual and institutionalised horrors that Clare cites (7). It is worth noting that one characteristic of such horrors is that they often come about because of qualities that in other circumstances would be seen as admirable. (8) Fearing Armageddon, we may still acknowledge the skill, effort, teamwork, endeavour and discipline that is essential in creating nuclear weapons.

It would seem odd indeed to develop a model of personal change and growth that paid no attention to our nature. It is only if we assume an unchanging negative or (self) destructive set (Original Sin?) that anxiety about rediscovering this nature could be justified. If a negative set has been adopted as part of our self-definition, is there anything odd about being offered different habits of thought and action which may allow the development of an alternative framework and a return to our nature as flexible, essentially social creatures? Whether Rogers' view is accurate or simply a noble aspiration, it seems preferable that counsellors should adopt it with a positive prognosis for change than they should accept Scott's miserable certainties about the human condition.

Experience as what really counts

Scott's second criticism of the so-called movement's tenets is thoroughly confused because he claims to be confronting the issue of the importance of experience in determining our view of the world (again quoting Rogers: "the touchstone of validity is my own experience" (9)) but he spends part of this section on an attack on the emphasis on feeling that exists in

some therapeutic frameworks, and part on the immodest claims made for meditation and relaxation by some "eastern derivative versions of SAM" (10). (This is a very partial view of relaxation training which was first introduced into formal psychotherapy by Western behavioural workers as early as 1938 (11)). There are a number of theoretical frameworks which place great emphasis on feelings and the action/experience content of an encounter (12), (13). Within them one may conclude that the reasons that people give for their actions may be mistaken, so that detailed exploration of their thoughts may be fruitless.

Such views would not be confined to the humanistic psychologies of recent origin that Scott characterises as SAMs but could also be derived from any of the classic dynamic psychologies. Freudians use the concept of repression (14) and in analysis seek to get beyond the conscious activity whereby the individual explains/justifies his actions, to the original trauma or pattern of relationship that locks him into this pattern of adjustment. Scientific behavioural theories, which until relatively recently have seen cognitions as irrelevant have adopted a broadly similar position. (15)

Scott reminds us that feelings do not exist in a vacuum (without indicating which theories suggest that they do). Of course feelings are related to thoughts and actions - they are part of our experience of people, objects and situations and whilst a single experience or the experience of one individual may not be a complete or even adequate guide to 'reality' it is nevertheless the prime source for our judgements about reality, because the experience of our environment is as near to it as we get, perception not being direct contact but a processing of environmental stimulation. (16), (17). In this sense both reflections (or thoughts) and reactions (or feelings) are third order events (and reflections on our reactions are fourth order). To give these primacy in our understanding of human activities is no more sensible than to attempt to study chemical processes without the concepts of atoms and molecules, elements and compounds. Ultimately experience is what really counts: it may be all there 'really' is.

Being in the Now

Which brings us to the question of 'nowness' and Scott's apparent inability to let go of the insistance by some writers (he gets hooked on Perls (18)) that emotions are important. Having distorted his analysis of experience by equating it with an anti-intellectual focus on emotion, Scott treats 'nowness' in the same way, apparently completely unaware that some of the oldest accounts of pathways to positive well-being (19) have extolled the necessity of focusing on that point (the only point) at which we actually experience anything - the Now, the moment between past and future. Zen understandings and many psychotherapeutic applications of nowness are about **being** in the moment rather than doing, intending, reflecting, fearing, wishing etc.: almost by definition then the enlightening or therapeutic

effect of this being is not immediately open to scientific enquiry and manipulation, but that does not necessarily render it valueless.

Scott's confusion gets worse; he treats 'now' and the 'present' as the same concept, criticising those for whom 'now' is important for their failure to consider the "broader social aims or issues" of those whose "here and now is abject poverty and misery, homelessness, starvation and ill-health" (20). Since "poverty" and "homelessness" etc. are general descriptions or categorisations they must be the result of reflection and are not simply matters of experience - therefore they may be part of my past, present or future but they are merely the context of 'now' when (if) I experience it. **Of course** getting in touch with my real experience 'in the now' will not "scratch the surface of structural inequality" (21) but many believe that the perspective provided by that experience may enable me to begin to change myself and the system(s) within which I operate. There is no suggestion that it will inevitably do so. One of the problems for a scientific investigation of the effects of 'nowness' is that such experience is as likely to render other experiences as of lesser importance and lead to greater acceptance rather than a desire to create change. Despite a general adoption of client-centredness (even by Scott) such acceptance might be difficult to stomach for the helper who is also committed to social reform. Perhaps the direction chosen is shaped by the context in which 'nowness' is found. However conceptualised it appears to be an element in many change processes, including effective counselling and psychotherapy.

The wisdom of the body

The over-deterministic assertions of body theorists like Lowen (22) seem highly questionable but Scott's criticisms under this heading are unenlightening. His argument seems to be that physical matters are less significant than socio-political ones (although this is not stated very clearly at this point). The examples he chooses may seem somewhat trivial to him (being overweight for example) but even in such cases it is clear that both psycho-social and socio-political aspects are important (23) and that to trivialise either is to lose a significant tool of understanding; apparent conflicts may just be a question of differing levels of analysis.

Perhaps some humanistic psychologies concentrate on what the body tells us because they recognise that our bodies are part of our social matrix and may provide important, even definitive, data within a social interaction. This is a view shared with many scientific psychologists through their studies on non-verbal communication (24). Some important non-verbal signals may be involuntary and attention to them by the emitter as well as the receiver of the signals may provide either party with information which is useful in developing an overall understanding of the person or situation. Many writers identified with scientific and academic traditions rather than humanistic psychology have been instrumental

in reminding people to take account of the wisdom of the body. (25), (26).

Emotional intensity

In this section Scott at last states clearly his preference for sociological explanations of individual unhappiness, but he also returns to his earlier questioning of the therapeutic efficacy of emotional intensity and discharge. It must be acknowledged that there is no convenient empirical study which directly compares therapies in which emotional discharge is permitted or encouraged and those in which it is ignored or discouraged, but many studies on the efficacy of therapy have found that it is factors such as the warmth of the therapist as perceived by the client and therapist acceptance of the client's feelings which seem to facilitate psychological change (27). Could anyone experience warmth and acceptance, feeling there was no space for emotional expression or discharge? True, providing for emotional release is not the same thing as insisting on it as the prime route to personal change, but has Scott demonstrated such insistance? If there was argument and evidence that counsellors were uncritically accepting an 'emotionalist' position the warning might be justified, but in this section, as elsewhere, these are lacking.

Communication

It would be hard to argue with Scott's case under this heading (repeated from Schur's 'analysis' of "The Awareness Trap" (28)) that focus on communication that became a focus on process to the exclusion of meaning, and a competition within the 'helping' relationship to be the best communicator, would be unlikely to produce a positive therapeutic outcome. Is it, though, really the case that this is more likely to happen within the humanistic therapies than with traditional dynamic (interpretive) work or in any other expert-centred form of therapy? Is not a focus on process rather than content at least as likely in a behavioural therapeutic regime in which technique is (was) seen as primary? No evidence is offered to prove that showing off communication skills has taken over from the desire to be an effective communicator who also enables others to communicate effectively.

It seems that what Scott is really attacking is the broader concept of interpersonal skills and interpersonal abilities which can be taught and applied across a broad range of personal situations, because such a model may seem to be socio-politically neutral, whilst locating the problem in the individual. This risk has to be acknowledged, but without some comparable explanatory factor it is difficult to see how any social explanation can get down to an individual level. Mass explanations do not provide a model of how individuals change. A skills analysis may offer a mediating factor whereby individual differences and potential for action are seen as a function of the skills developed during socialization into a particular class or sub-culture. Unlike other individualized explanations (c.f. pathological models) such an ~~analysis~~ does not tend to

determinism and has as many radical as conservative possibilities.

Responsibility

This is a major issue for all those who counsel, offer therapy or growth opportunities, and here, at last, it seems that Scott's point is well made - the issue of responsibility is **not** resolved just by asserting that it does not exist: that I am only responsible for (have to take account of) myself. This view undoubtedly became common in the 'me decade' and it seems likely that the distorted view of social relationships which it hides still affects some whose conceptual frameworks were developed in that era.

The difficulty with the proposition that I am only responsible for myself is that, whilst possibly true, it does not exhaust the problem of responsibility - for that concept includes matters of both causality and accountability: not only questions of who and what am I responsible **for**, but who and what am I responsible to? This is a subject for much further analysis and counsellors can be grateful that Scott has once again brought it to our attention although many will feel that it is somewhat extreme to argue that one common conceptual muddle creates a movement and others will point out that the muddle is not an accurate or necessary extrapolation from the work of those theorists (29) who have given significant consideration to the issue of responsibility.

Conclusions

In his own summary, Scott identifies his central concerns: firstly the problem that a focus on process may be at the cost of content (somewhat typically he overstates this as "emphasis on process is invariably at the cost of content" (30)), secondly that the focus on the individual 'interiorizes' any problem and tends to exclude consciousness of societal issues that may cause or affect personal misery, and thirdly that a regard for the power of emotion in peoples' lives tends to exclude consideration of intellect both in individual cases and in the formulation of coherent theory.

These are all significant issues for counselling and therapy but Scott's pseudo-religious 'Gospel according to SAM' seems to be an attempt to discredit by association with an irrational dogmatism that is not demonstrated, and it is by no means clear that the problems he raises are confined to the new humanistic psychologies and therapies. For they are simply problems of any individualized explanation of human action, whether it be theological, humanistic or scientific. It is not only Perls who has to deal with the possibility of process becoming more important than content, but classical psychoanalysis and behavioural therapies are open to this risk. It is not only Rogerians who have some way to go in showing how individual change and individual action makes any impact on the nature or structure of society and how personal development without change in the social conditions in which people operate can be expected to be maintained over time

- all psychological theories, all approaches to change which work at the level of the individual rather than the mass have to deal with this issue just as all mass theories have to develop or assume a mechanism whereby social forces may be seen to interact with individual consciousness and action.

Thus we return to the issues of emotion and motivation and the relationship between intellect and feeling and again note that these are not issues which are confined to the new humanistic psychologies. Any understanding of 'human nature' must make some attempt to find a place and balance between thoughts and feelings that surround human actions. To assert that feelings are a vital part of how human beings are in our society is not to call for an end to attempts to understand human beings in a rational way, nor a denial of the value of our problem-solving and reasoning capacities. An attempt to build an exclusively rational model of human actions is itself irrational.

It has been argued that Scott's creation of a Self-Awareness Movement is spurious and his attempts to develop a critique of significant issues in counselling largely mistaken. Medicine and Social Work have benefited from a critical sociological analysis of their beliefs and functions and it may well be time for such an analysis of counselling. Some will have looked to find aspects of that analysis here - unfortunately they will have been disappointed.

In that peaceful centre
There is perfect stillness
And everything we could ever need
And much more besides

All activity spirals from that centre
Meaningful action is grounded there
Even the deepest emotions are superficial
Compared to that centre
Though they may help to bring us closer

In that peaceful centre
All beings are one being
Nothing, no-one is ever lost

In that still and perfect centre
Is pure love

Richard Harvey