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The Psychologist as Agent of change

I'm a psychologist, employed by the Warsaw medical Academy. My main task is to lead adaptation groups for first-year students. They aim to help young people adapt to their new environment and to overcome initial difficulties. I'd like to share with you some reflections about my work.

Nevertheless, I must begin by tackling a more general problem, which concerns the goals psychologists employed by institutions should set themselves when their clients are in a state of conflict with that institution. It appears that there are three possible solutions:

- to realise the goals of the institution which, being the employer, has a right to expect that from its employee. And so, for example, if students rebel against the impersonal and hostile way they are being treated by their school, the psychologists' job should be to pacify them;

- to realise the clients' goals - after all, that's what they came to see her for. In the above mentioned example, the psychologist should teach them how to fight back against the school;

- to realise goals that stem from her professional role, that is, to show the students which sources of the conflict lie in themselves, help them integrate these elements, in the final aim of fostering their personal development. A solution that would imply the necessity of the school changing its way of functioning is, under our conditions, impossible.

None of these solutions appears as the right one to me. The first one is obviously contrary to my personal and professional values - the psychologist cannot be a thought-policeman. The second one appears erroneous, as it doesn't solve the real problem: a well-integrated, militant students' group might, perhaps, be able to counter effectively the school's pressures, but this can only lead to having the antagonists remain in their original positions, and will petrify the problem, instead of solving it.

The third solution - by far the most appealing - appears to me as a breach of faith. The students do not expect me to foster their personal development, but to teach them practical skills. At best, they expect to become, as a result of the adaptation group, more relaxed as individuals and more integrated as a group. Anything exceeding that level is perceived as just "so much humanistic bullshit", and rejected. They will change in time - I saw them change - but you cannot **impose** development. What's more: I'm not so sure that I can clearly separate professional and personal values and opinions here.

It therefore would appear that trying to resolve this issue has put us in a quandary. But, if there are no good answers to a question, it simply means that the question is no good.

It seems to me, that the question should be: should I do something in such a situation?" And the answer to that question is: no. This is not my conflict, and I cannot, in my professional capacity, become party to it. As a human being I sympathise, sometimes with the students who feel the school is against them, sometimes with the professors who feel the students are against them. Still, I can't act solely on that basis - although it would be stupid to deny its reality.

The psychologist's job is to help other people grow; at their own pace, according to their own values. The psychologist can only be a gardener who helps growth, *not* a genetic engineer, tinkering with its aims and directions. This does not mean that her approach should be detached and cold, but it does mean that growth takes place exclusively in the interplay between seed and soil. She is on the outside - though a seed in the soil herself.

To return to the subject. The people I work with are young, 18 - 20 years of age. They have just recently passed their admission exam - no small feat in Poland, where you have 7 - 8 candidates for each place at the Academy - and think that, at least for the time being, they've got it made.

What's in store for them is the most serious adaptation shock in their lives so far. The vast majority of these students want to study medicine because they want to learn how to help people - they're told to dissect cadavers and learn chemical reactions instead. They are contact-oriented and see medicine as an idealist social mission - they are confronted with the cold reality of an impersonal institution that couldn't care less. Some of this myth-breaking is certainly healthy, but it's overall effect is producing people who are dissatisfied and alienated from their work - and don't even know why. They aren't happy as people; they aren't effective as doctors. Something gets broken in the process.

The students in the example given in the beginning are therefore certainly right to rebel - but the solution of the problem lies not in protecting their idealistic strivings from the cold world of institutionalised medicine, but in finding a way of helping them to integrate that world in order to change it, and not to be changed in the process. And this is where the ideas and techniques of humanistic psychology enter the picture: anything that increases their insight, expands their consciousness and heightens their sensitivity will help them when they will have to choose between alienation and self-realisation. These techniques have to be applied on a very practical level in order not to be rejected, but they must aim deep in order not to be useless. I found a combination of Gestalt and Encounter techniques, together with lots of discussion and cognitive input to be quite effective. The aim is not solving immediate problems, but to give the participants tools for self-development they may use later on.