Individual differences and institutional constraints

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Abstract. This article develops a multilevel examination of the structural changes in schooling and employment counselling that are necessitated by rapidly evolving conditions in the job markets of postindustrial as well as developing economies. International and national macro-structures appear increasingly fluid in the altered political and commercial environments of the 1990s. These alterations place wrenching constraints on national and regional institutions as well as the individuals who are seeking a job niche that is not only personally satisfying and rewarding but stable. Distinct regional and provincial structures need to be understood idiographically and modified as global changes amplify at all levels. At the school and jobseeking end of this continuum are the legions of confused individuals of widely varying aptitudes, competencies, and interests who avail themselves of government programs of an educational, counselling, and retraining character. Major developmental and career psychology issues that flow from these conditions and structural changes are addressed. Issues seen to be of major importance that will be examined are (among others): correspondence between the demand characteristics of schools and regional job markets; discrepancies between the givens of physical anthropology and institutional demands on both children and adults, poorness of fit between individuals and the institutions in which they work and are trained, and the threat of a cultural entropy that banalizes institutions and standardizes all dimensions of life.

Human diversity

Much of the excitement and beauty of life springs from the diversity which we find in the world about us, a diversity that we prize as much in people as in the marketplace, in art as in nature. My concern, which I will attempt to persuade you to share, is that uniformity and entropy are in the ascendancy, and that those of us who serve as counsellors to adults as well as to youths are pressured to collaborate with the dominant institutions of our societies in assimilating them into an increasingly banal and standardized world culture and economic order. My gravest fears spring from the excessive institutionalization of our lives — and especially the lives of our children in a place called school.

The ideas that I present are meant to continue a long-term and passionate debate. The argument that will unfold will focus on the peculiar order and
complexity with which the lives of even little children are being organized, on the one hand, and the banalization of the world culture into which they will be inserted, on the other. The human instruments, par excellence, for realizing this, as such notable commentators as Lewis Mumford (e.g., 1970) and Jacques Ellul (1964) have argued, are the institution — and its handmaiden, technology.

The major thesis of this talk is that a coercive institutionalization of the lives of young children, abetted by mental health practitioners, has moved in a direction that standardizes behaviour and reduces freedom of action. The process by which this is done is not natural to the psychophysiological constitution of the human organism; for people crave diversity of activities; they are curiosity-driven; they mature, if given the opportunity, with a diversity of interests, tastes, and affections. The stupor induced by boredom may be the greatest threat to ‘industrial man’s’ mental wellbeing, and he flees from it even at the cost of engaging in self-destructive activities. In the workplace, nonstereotypic behaviours have been tolerated only in the measure that they could be matched by a corresponding need of the production process. This ensures the production of wealth and economic growth. Growth and prosperity are enhanced by achieving minimal economies of scale and by the standardization of production methods. The counsellor has been forcibly enlisted in promoting this process. It will be of interest to look at the interplay of some of these variables.

Institutionalization

For thousands of years human beings have struggled to establish order in a universe which, though governed by natural laws, gave the appearance of being capricious and in many respects chaotic. Humankind traditionally reacted by trying to impose order — on itself, on societies in general, and on ‘nature’ itself; history records that it has succeeded all too well. So much order has been established, especially of a socio-political character, that it has seemed to stifle the spontaneous and creative élan of the most gifted persons as well as the most ordinary.

Lewis Mumford stated a generation ago that ‘the problem of preserving human freedom in the face of environmental, institutional, or technological pressures did not begin with the automatic machine. Custom, law, taboo, religious {ritual}, military coercion have all in the past imposed repetitive behavior and rigid conditions of performance upon earlier human communities’ (1970, p. 185). Some of this was needed. Much outlived its usefulness. The scope for control and coercion, arising from mushrooming technologies that have been placed at the service of large institutions, has