SOCIAL CLASS AND PSYCHOTHERAPY: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT: Professional social workers are the primary resource for psychotherapeutic services among the lower status groups in our society. While everyone in the profession knows this, relatively little systematic research and theory has been generated on the question of how to adapt our interventions so as to better serve this clientele.

Bernstein's work on social class and speech codes is examined. His theories are applied to the problem of conducting psychotherapy with a social stratum whose language code is ill-suited for the more "traditional" verbally oriented therapies. Some suggestions for alternative treatment approaches are made.

Introduction

It can be said, without excessive fear of contradiction, that the niche occupied by social workers in the structure of American professions is that of psychotherapists to the lower classes, the least favored groups in our population. Because of professional social work's historical origins in charity organization societies of England and the United States we have a tradition of involvement in efforts to ameliorate the privation of the poor.

But what began as "friendly visiting" by representatives of charity organization societies became rather quickly professionalized. By 1922, Mary Richmond had outlined a casework treatment typology which included working with the client toward achieving insight through the vehicle of a professional relationship and providing knowledge of the resources and influences of the social environment (Strean, 1974, p. 52). This rapid development of a reasonably coherent treatment model around which professional training and activity could cluster is especially interesting when one considers the radical economic and sociological critiques of capitalist society which were the intellectual forebears of social work.

It is by now common knowledge that the wide dissemination of Freu-
dian theory into popular culture and professional subcultures in the United States has given enormous momentum to the "psychologistic" thinkers in American social work (cf. Perlman, 1957). What is interesting, and enormously important for the contemporary student of social work to understand, is the rapprochement of two quite different frames of mind. For in spite of individuals in this profession who adopt either a dogmatic psychologistic or sociologistic perspective (and models of intervention which emanate from these disparate perspectives), this is a profession which is both psychological and sociological in its orientation. "Psycho-social" is the term usually employed to convey the bifocal qualities of social work.

The controversy over our rightful professional role has created a fragmented identity, and this makes a lot of social workers nervous to the point of demanding a resolution of the crisis by making a decisive step toward either social activism or "pure" psychotherapy. Neither course is very practical. We are a bureaucratized profession, a fact which makes wholesale radicalization quite unlikely. On the other hand, we cannot completely ignore the social class position of our clientele. A study conducted by the Family Service Association of America showed that, "approximately 70% of the clients in family agencies that were surveyed were members of the lower or working class" (Strean, 1974, p. 59).

Masters level social workers in corrections, child welfare, public welfare, in-patient and out-patient mental health clinics, and similar agencies treat the most serious psychopathology and family pathology to be found in our society. Clients in these mostly public agencies have traditionally been largely from the working and lower classes. This paper will discuss Bernstein's thesis that working and lower-class people are socialized into a language system which is ill-suited to the conduct of psychotherapy. The implications of this theory for traditional treatment methods, and some thoughts on why the language codes of less-favored groups are better suited to newer, alternative therapies will be explored here.

A Bourgeois America?

Even such erudite social scientists as Bell (1976) have a tendency to perpetuate the image of contemporary America as having been completely transported into bourgeois modernity. Bell argues that the American cultural scene is dominated by the hip, postmodernist ethic of immediate sensation, hedonism, and social and political nihilism. He cites the trends in theater, sculpture, painting, and other arts as well as the revolt of many middle- and upper-middle-class adolescents in the 1960s, in a very tightly woven discussion of the recent past and probable future of American capitalist society. In this writer’s opinion, Bell’s thesis