Spotlight

Bringing Outsiders In: “Visions and Realities”

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A continuing dilemma for preventionists is the pathology that results from prejudice. The systematic distribution of life options by sex and race etch differences into stigmata that erupt through succeeding generations in a variety of dysfunctional outcomes. Practitioners split on the need for changing the system versus adapting “outsiders” to the world as it is. The body of psychological “knowledge” that informs today’s scholarship and tomorrow’s public policies is based on research done primarily with male white subjects. Little is known of the psychological development of women.

This month Spotlight celebrates the establishment of a center that promises to advance the field by asking new questions, and formulating new approaches to old problems. The Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies at Wellesley College in Massachusetts was begun in October of 1981 with an endowment of $2.5 million, and a dedication to research, service, and training in the prevention of psychological problems. While providing preventive services to the Wellesley College community is a major function, it’s the Center’s broader charge that draws Spotlight’s focus.

The promise of the Center’s approach to prevention is that it encompasses outsiders. Jean Baker Miller, Stone Center Director, pledges... “we will bring the strengths to be gained when the study of all human beings is augmented by those who have been outsiders, both by reason of sex and especially by reason of sex combined with race, class or religion.” Building a body of knowledge of women’s psychological development is the organizing theme of the Stone Center’s current work.

Where to start and who to start with are major prevention issues. The decision of where to intervene in the life cycle forces the most dedicated practitioner into a prevention version of “lifeboat.” The tabula rasa approach says, “Save the children.” Efforts to prevent psychopathology in infants would seem, logically, to promise increasing returns in the health of future generations, as well as those directly targeted. But lacking lifeboats for all those cast adrift, this solution leaves adolescents and adults of all ages to founder.

Adolescents and young adults are the age groups targeted for the Stone Center’s initial efforts. Miller envisions the Center as building in recent significant psychological developments—such as research on the learning process across the life cycle, and the transactions between persons and their
environments. Recent studies indicate that people have the capacity to learn, change, and grow significantly, across the life cycle.

The Stone Center's first action project is the Search/Research Group Project. The small group forums have two purposes. First, they're designed to provide opportunities for psychological growth for adults of all ages. Participants are expected to anticipate and short circuit major emotional difficulties through the process of examining the important issues in their lives. In addition to preventive services, the small groups also serve a research function: they provide material for the analysis of psychological development at various life stages.

Current research confirming environmental variables as critical components in behavior argues for a systems approach to preventive interventions. Projects that focus on the child alone, with no attention to the major forces and influences within the home, school, and wider social and economic community, have failed to produce lasting gains. The Stone Center's second action project, currently under development, is designed to take account of environmental context. The project is intended to prevent depression in low income employed mothers. The high stress and isolation of this population places them at high risk for depression, and places their children at high risk for a variety of negative outcomes.

In addition to the action project and the provision of preventive mental health services to the Wellesley community, the Stone Center is actively involved in the development of a body of theory within the prevention field. Stone Center scholars currently contribute to a series of working papers, *Work in Progress*, covering such topics as women and power, women's roles, sexual violence, work inhibitions in women, anger in women and men, eating patterns as a reflection of women's development, issues in the psychotherapy of lesbian women, and the meaning of "dependency" in female-male relationships. Over the next five years, 12 postdoctoral fellows will receive research training on gender and mental health, and develop research projects at the Stone Center and Wellesley's Center for Research on Women. Funding for the postdoctoral training is provided by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH).

The first course on women's needs given by the NIMH Staff College was planned and conducted by the Stone Center in the summer of 1982. The course provides the Center with opportunities to present its perspectives to mental health professionals across the country, and to receive input from them about the problems encountered in the field in serving women's mental health needs.

The theoretical directions set by Center scholars challenge much of what past decades accepted as knowledge. The construct of the self is key in this reassessment. Miller notes that the "self," as found in Western philosophy and psychology, has functioned to serve male needs for separation and power. The distortions of human experience on which the construct is based neither mirror female reality, nor serve either sex as an adaptive mechanism.

The concept of "self," then, as it comes down to us in psychological fields, has encouraged a complex sequence of processes leading to a