

STUDENT PERSONNEL WORK And Personality Development

AS AN INTRODUCTION this paper will review the current orientation of student personnel work. When it reached its full flowering in the thirties, student personnel work in higher education was concerned about individual differences. To a considerable extent "the student personnel point of view" represented a recognition that educational procedures and educational goals must take cognizance of and adapt to the heterogeneity of our school and college-going population. Our national ethic of stimulating every member of our society to the fullest development of his resources has insured that student populations will include people with widely varying ability patterns and purposes. Student personnel work was oriented to enabling these varied students to adapt to the demands of the educational process and to facilitate the adaptation of the educational process to this variability in students.

However, student personnel work has passed from the age of individual differences to the age of personality development. The recent world upheavals and the correlated awesome advance in our capacities to control the material world has focused attention upon educational goals beyond those of the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Great emphasis is placed upon the goals of emotional maturity and integration, the degree to which our young men and women will be capable of gaining their satisfactions within a framework which permits satisfaction to their fellow men. Thus, we can say that where student personnel

work has always been concerned with individuality it is now more concerned with the emotional and motivational life of the individual, in short, his personality.

This new emphasis means that today's personnel worker, whether he is providing financial aid, acting as a dormitory counselor, a faculty adviser, a reading specialist, or a student activities adviser, is likely to be concerned about the degree to which his relationships with students and his services to them will contribute to this general educational goal of personality development. Most of these student personnel functions and relationships are not counseling relationships in the psychotherapeutic sense, nor are student personnel workers necessarily psychological counselors and psychotherapists. Yet the current orientation of student personnel work is such as to motivate them to work toward goals essentially similar to those of therapeutic counselors and psychotherapists. Consequently, these student personnel workers face the task of controlling their relationships with students in such a way that their unique functions are preserved and at the same time they are not necessarily drawn into a therapeutic relationship for which they are not prepared.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the possible contributions of psychotherapeutic research to this problem of the student personnel worker's utilization of his unique relationship to students so as to contribute to their personality development and his control of that relationship so that it does not become a purely psychotherapeutic one.

The first contribution which comes from therapeutic theory and personality research is already so well accepted that it hardly seems necessary to mention it, namely, that

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No Single Rule of Action

by

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motivations are not necessarily to be taken at face value. In these days when the language of psychoanalysis has virtually entered the man-in-the-street's vocabulary, one need not look very hard to find examples of the utilization of this basic concept. In fact, one might be tempted to sound the alarm, warning of the danger of over interpretation, of reading into the behavior of others more complex motivations than actually exist. Student personnel workers are becoming increasingly aware that the student, who comes to them seeking information or advice, may in fact be seeking something else. One student may be seeking an affiliation which will help him temporarily replace the void created by his separation from home while he establishes relationships with his contemporaries which enable him to proceed to a new level of maturity. Another student may be seeking an externalized control to help him finish an incomplete process of establishing internal standards and controls over his emotions and motivations. The student personnel worker who does not intend to assume the responsibilities of the psychotherapist still can contribute to the personality development of such youngsters as they try to master these normal developmental situations. He can do this by being understanding and interested enough in people to lend himself to the kind of relationships these various students need, while still avoiding any effort, such as through interpretation, to manipulate the relationship therapeutically.

A second theoretical position, which is beginning to emerge from research and theory in therapeutic relationships, is that there is no single rule of action. There is no one way of relating oneself to other people, no one technique, no one way of responding, which is the key to making relationships therapeutic. Perhaps some will feel that this statement would not receive general support, for example, in non-directive theory. It seems evident that Rogers would find the above proposition wholly acceptable. The discussion of the attitude and orientation of the counselor in the second chapter of his most recent book [4] evidences this attitude. On the other hand, he may not agree, if this principle is extended to lead to the conclusion that there are aspects of relationships which become therapeutic according to the specific needs of the person being helped [1]. There are other theoretical positions which accept this proposition and there is a little evidence to support this notion which will be cited later.

Of what use to the student personnel worker is the proposition that there is no rule which will make a relationship therapeutic? One of the major applications to student personnel work is the check that it offers to an earlier optimism that almost anyone, without any special training, who resolved to respect other people's integrity and prefaced all of his communications with the words, "you feel," could contribute to any individual's personality development. Recent research and theory points fairly definitely to the alternative notion that any specific approach to people from a relationship point of view may be helpful or not helpful, even harmful, according to the needs of the specific person involved. This leads to the conclusion that the student personnel worker should

The student personnel worker can make a contribution here

avoid any active effort to utilize a relationship therapeutically unless he has had specific therapeutic training.

What is the alternative? Let us cite the analogy of mothers who today are extremely conscious of mental health experts and are continually seeking their advice on how to be a good mother. Most of us are aware of the degree to which mothers have become sensitive to the effects of their relationships to their children on their children's future mental health. These mothers are in an extremely confusing situation. They can obtain many dicta as to how a child should be brought up. "Keep it on a schedule." "Do not keep it on a schedule." "Give it a lot of love." "Discipline begins in the home." Each new pronouncement crowds on the heels of the preceding often contradictory one. Many of us feel that if the mother is a reasonably well adjusted person and she and her husband have an adequate relationship, it is not necessary to tell her how to behave in her relationship with her children. Her natural reactions will probably be the right ways for bringing up her child. This of course does not mean that parents may not be helped by general information about child development which will enable them to understand otherwise puzzling behavior by their children. But the handing out of rules of behavior probably interferes with and blocks potentially good parents from being natural and therefore good parents, and simply accentuates the guilt feelings and anxiety of disturbed parents who either are unable to follow these rules or misuse them as expressions of their own neurotic needs. Similarly, our answer to the student personnel worker would be to suggest that he not try to think about the way he ought to act, but simply act naturally, using his knowledge of his job, whatever understanding of students he brings to the job, and, above all, adopting the attitude of wanting to understand students. In short, the answer would be, "Be yourself."

Obviously being yourself will not necessarily be helpful to all the students who come for help. In some cases the inability

to be helpful might arise from some lack of information about individual development or from some personal inadequacy. In other cases, the student's personal problem may be of such a nature that only a special carefully controlled therapeutic relationship can be useful to him. It is for these reasons that it would appear that the appropriate step, where the personnel worker's efforts are not met with the normal response, is to consult with psychological counselors, clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, or equivalent specialists, depending upon availability.

Natural Relationships

The next section will consider aspects of the natural relationships of student personnel workers with students which need to be avoided in order to prevent an unplanned therapeutic relationship and, perhaps, to point to some aspects of the natural relationships with students which would seem to make them helpful.

One of the aspects of interpersonal relationships which seem to make them potentially more involving is their degree of ambiguity. In frankly therapeutic situations the client comes to the helper with some source of dissatisfaction which he has tended to localize within himself. The therapist indicates his willingness to be of assistance but ordinarily does not make very clear as to what will take place except that they will talk. The relatively unsophisticated client, striving to formulate a more specific conception of the relationship, may define it as "I'll talk and he'll give me advice." But the therapist soon disabuses him of this misconception. Eventually he is left with a more general idea, namely, "I talk, I am not sure about what, and he may or may not respond. I am not sure what he will say, whether he will try to judge or what." This kind of situation seems to be an inevitable accompaniment of any effort to get the client to confide his emotions and feelings. In fact, it seems to be a necessary accompaniment to any process of having a person experience feelings in such a way that he can learn to deal

with them more constructively. It seems to be a necessary part of making it possible for him to have feelings toward a person with whom he has hitherto virtually no ties and who has no realistic relationship to him other than this helping one. It is around this situation that the irrational character of the person's feelings and of his behavior appear more clearly to himself and to the helper from behind the facade of rationality. One study by Dibner [2], at the University of Michigan, confirmed our expectation that ambiguous interpersonal relationships lead to great anxiety presumably on the part of those whose structure of rationality rests on a shaky foundation. In another context, the study of the personality foundations of prejudice, Frenkel-Brunswik [3] found that rigid people were less tolerant of ambiguity.

When people have relatively distinct situations to react to, when the nature of these situations is clear-cut and the outcome of alternative reactions are well known it is easier for them to be rational and to react realistically. The student personnel worker, who is not prepared to undertake therapeutic responsibilities, should avoid having his legitimate interest and concern for the personality development of students lead him into this more ambiguously defined relationship through a process of encouraging a kind of open-ended confiding.

This principle is also applicable to student discipline and other forms of social control. Adolescents are already subject to considerable turbulence in their emotions and motivations. They need to know the rules in very specific form as an aid to them in controlling and integrating their surging impulses and feelings. Therefore, the student activities administrator does well to allow students no more freedom than they are ready to handle and to make certain that the boundaries are clearly and consistently communicated. He must recognize that these youngsters are in a critical stage of the internal battle between their dependent and independent needs. To give them too much freedom may overwhelm them, to give them too little freedom may activate unrealistic and ir-

rational needs to assert independence if only as a denial of their dependent needs.

Related to the effect of ambiguous situations is the understanding that it is through cognition and cognitive processes that we are able to control and utilize our impulses and emotions in positive ways. In a large majority of the cases, one of the major tasks of the student personnel worker is to aid the student to acquire the information, the skills, the conceptual tools, which will enable him to gain the ability to express his emotions and motivations in a positive and constructive fashion. Too often our current awareness of the importance of emotions and motivations as determiners of action has led us to overlook the importance of cognitive processes. Because we have become sensitive to the frequency with which information and concepts are used negatively, purely for the defense of some particular motivation, we sometimes fall into the habit of assuming that all cognitive resources are at all times media for defensive and regressive expression. Perhaps it is this error that has helped to power the current humanistically oriented revolt in education.

Students Need Information

The suggestion is that the student personnel worker should not allow his orientation toward the goals of personality development and his awareness that emotions and motivations may lead to a distorted and regressive utilization of information, skills, and conceptual tools to deter him from continuing to make an important part of his contribution in this area. The financial adviser or the faculty counselor must continue to offer students information about better, quicker paths to their goals. His awareness of the effects of emotional and motivational factors should help him to avoid a lot of wasted effort by enabling him to become aware of particular students or particular times when his efforts in this direction will *not* contribute to the student's growth. These are the times when referral to others more therapeutically trained are the called-for responses.

Finally, we have begun to be aware that the emotional tone of relationships need not be uniform for maximum effectiveness to each individual person. It is not very clear just how the student personnel worker not specially trained for therapeutic work can make use of this awareness. Earlier it had been suggested that the best course of action for the student personnel worker is to act naturally. Perhaps one application of this principle for the student personnel worker is to avoid the mistake of unconsciously accepting some stereotype of the "good" personnel worker. Some might have the stereotype of the good personnel worker as a relatively effusive out-going person who meets people easily, smiles readily, and often is on a first name basis very soon. Others may visualize the student personnel worker as a relatively diffident, quiet, non-expressive person who grows on one. Probably most of us fall somewhere between in our usual mode of behavior. However, through the influence of one of these stereotypes we might make the mistake of clothing our behavior with a thin veneer of such an ideal.

The adolescent's normal conflicts about independence and dependence have already been mentioned. When the adolescent is feeling the pressure and demands of the adult world and is fearful that the last vestiges of his childhood are being impatiently torn from him rather than his being given the opportunity to drop them willingly and gladly, an interaction with an adult who is naturally warm and giving

rather than demanding may be sufficient support to allay his fears and enable him to move more freely toward independence. Similarly, the youngster who is fearful of his capacity to be independent, who is striving hard to control his regressive impulses to reach out for supporting relationships, will be helped by someone who naturally keeps a greater distance between himself and other people.

It behooves each personnel worker to be aware of his own natural ways of reacting, when necessary to restrain these natural ways, and, above all, to refer or consult when these ways do not fit into the needs of the students with whom he works.

In this process of urging the student personnel worker to be himself instead of trying to apply poorly digested therapeutic concepts, it was difficult to avoid the impression of setting up still one more array of rules for therapeutic conduct. Therefore, it is best to close with the affirmation that the student personnel worker in the age of personality development must strive to be himself rather than a psychotherapist.

References

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EDUCATING FOR RETIREMENT

Teaching people how to make retirement a happy and satisfying experience is the goal of a research study which recently received a grant of nearly \$4,000 from the Hartford (Conn.) Heart Association—one of the first awards to be made by a local Heart Association to support research in the economic-sociological field. The study, to be conducted by the University of Connecticut, will seek to establish an educational program which can be made available through business and industry to employees who are nearing retirement age.—*The American Heart*, Fall, 1954.