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A Brief History of the Philosophy of Counselling Psychology in the United Kingdom

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Appendix 1

A Brief History of the Philosophy of Counselling Psychology in the United Kingdom by Susan van Scoyoc

http://www.bps.org.uk/dcop/home/philosophy/philosophy_home.cfm accessed 5 Dec 2010

In order to understand present day psychology and especially counselling psychology's claim to a particular philosophical underpinning we must first explore the fundamental questions of man and also examine the philosophy of science. This helps us to appreciate why "science" is evaluated the way it is by organisations such as NICE whilst many counselling psychologists value qualitative research methods such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. <http://www.ipa.bbk.ac.uk/>

Early Greek Philosophers (pre Socrates, Aristotle and Plato) considered three main areas of thought: Metaphysics, Epistemology and Ethics. These considerations were the basis of modern Western thought. Metaphysics explores what the world and its components (such as human beings) are made of and seeks the ultimate substance of reality. The metaphysicists concluded that there is a true reality (noumenon) under the apparent reality (phenomenon). Epistemology explores the question of how do we know what is true or false, real or not real. Indeed, taken to its logical conclusion one has to question whether it is utterly hopeless to determine whether something is real or not. Finally the study of Ethics explored good and bad, right and wrong and is often also called morality.

The exploration of knowledge itself was divided into Empiricism which believes that all knowledge comes through the senses and Rationalism which believes all knowledge comes from thought and reason. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/greekphi/>

However, even as the Greeks began to consider the meaning of matter, reality or morals these were being explored in the East by philosophers Buddha and Confucius and Lao Tzu. The eastern philosophers explored the social and contextual views of human beings. Unlike western philosophy (and psychology) the focus is not on the individual but upon the individual in context. Experience is viewed in terms of being or not being and things (the essence of an object) is seen in terms of proximity to you, the being. There is a desired goal of human development which encompasses a place within the whole, whether that is society as in Confucian thought, society and the natural world as in Tao/Daoism or the move towards insight and enlightenment as in Buddhist thought).

Back in the West, Descartes (1640) wrote Meditations promoting Rationalism with "I think," "I exist" and often translated as "I think therefore I am." <http://www.iep.utm.edu/descarte/> Francis Bacon, one of Britain's first "scientists" wrote in The New Atlantis (1664) of a utopian society run by scientists. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/bacon/> The belief that science would provide the answers to living had arrived. By the early twentieth century the general base of most areas of scientific study including psychology was logical positivism following the formation of the discussion group known as the Vienna Circle by Moritz Schlick, and later joined by Rudolph Carnap <http://www.iep.utm.edu/viennacr/>. The basis of logical positivism is that all knowledge is based upon empirical observation assisted by the use of logic and mathematics.

“Good science” was therefore perceived as hypothesis testing and any theoretical statement is only valid if it can be empirically tested and verified (the verifiability principle). Karl Popper is reported as stating it was the wish to distinguish Einstein’s theory from that of Freud, Adler and Marx, that led him to propose falsifiability as the criterion for separating science from pseudo-science. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/cr-ratio/>

This philosophical view of empirical testing was adopted by the Behaviourists such as B.F. Skinner, whilst psychoanalytic theories, amongst others, were dismissed as “untestable” or “unfalsifiable” and therefore without value. The logical positivist approach, whilst so widely adopted within scientific research, effectively dismissed all metaphysical and also theological statements as meaningless, along with phenomenology.

The psychologist researcher, using the dominant scientific view, remained an impartial, objective observer. Behaviour was and is seen as something which can be predicted and manipulated, then quantified and statistical laws applied. We see this today with the dominance of evidence based (scientifically proven) cognitive behavioural treatments for various classifiable “disorders” because the approaches used can sit comfortably with the target focused, measurable outcomes of “hard” science.

This logical positivism is closely linked to reductionism in that both propose entities of one kind can be reduced to entities of another, for example, that mental events can be reduced to chemical events. This belief continues to fuel the explosion of psychopharmacology and the strongly held view that there is a chemical treatment (if only we could find it) for every kind of psychological distress. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/red-ism/>

By the mid twentieth century criticism of these scientific, logical positivism views were emerging in the form of post modernists. The postmodernists, such as Michel Foucault, criticised all modern philosophy which had continued to seek objective reality and ultimate truth. He also suggested that much of what is deemed “mental illness” is a reaction to the development of a restrictive web of social rules and regulations needed to ensure the survival of capitalism. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/foucfem/>

As the post modernists were emerging so too were two key figures in humanistic psychology with a post modernist approach: Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. Both Rogers and Maslow proposed a positive view of human beings, believing in an inner drive towards a developmental goal of living existentially. The humanistic perspective sees human beings as guided by a tendency that drives someone to become a fully functioning person whose locus of evaluation and control is internal.

Rogers stated “given certain psychological conditions, the individual has the capacity to reorganize his field of perception, including the way he perceives himself, and that a concomitant or a resultant of this perceptual reorganization is an appropriate alteration of behavior.” (Rogers 1947) <http://webpace.ship.edu/cgboer/rogersexcerpt.html>

Existentialists such as Martin Heidegger have contributed to such diverse fields as phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics, political theory, psychology and theology. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/heidegge/> Heidegger stressed the nihilism of modern technological society, and attempted to win Western philosophical tradition back to the question of being. He placed an emphasis on language as the vehicle through which the question of being could be unfolded, and on the special role of poetry.

A present day counselling psychologist continues to be faced with the same challenges: how do humans work or think; how do we (as psychologists) react to how they (clients or patients) see the world; is it real or not real; do we impose our moral view or do we instead respect different views? It is interesting to observe psychologists current attempts to combine differing ways of thinking about the world (East-West, Rationalism-Empiricism, Behavioural-Spiritual) in therapies such as mindfulness based cognitive therapy.

Susan van Scoyoc, April 2010

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