A THEORY OF JUST COMPASSION

Community Psychology's interest in justice and care

Community Psychology has a history of being interested in the interaction between individuals and their social contexts. Seymour Sarason first articulated contemporary psychology's particular interest in this aspect of life in the early and mid 1970's. His notion of Psychological Sense of Community (PSoC) has become the cornerstone upon which further developments have been built (Sarason, 1974).

Belongingness was one of the early signifiers of PSoC. Sarason and others initially noted that this experience of individuals was a bit like the concept of love – it was awkward to define, yet one knew when it was present, and when it was absent. These pioneer authors therefore encouraged ways of describing and understanding community that were more hands-on or personal than the traditional quantitative and operational constructs of the 'scientific', empiricist psychology. For example, Sarason noted that the development of the 'sense of' the life world was from a position of becoming "an insider, at bat [sic]…. [in order to] experience the natural functioning of that particular aspect of society" (1974, pp. 10, 248).

Thus, psychologists interested in this part of their discipline tended to be those who became involved in applied projects that were focussed on assisting individuals, or groups, in a community setting. The need to consider broader factors led to the development of human ecological constructs. The desire to minimise harm kept an emphasis on preventative strategies alive.

One classical framework for fleshing out PSoC came in the 1980's – McMillan and Chavis (1986) outlined four key elements of PSoC: membership, mutual influence, individual needs, and daily connectedness. There have been numerous attempts to add to, modify and test out this framework over the last twenty years.

One other dimension that has been flirted with over this time has been exploring the role of the transcendent nature of human society – or its spirituality. McMillan (1996), from the McMillan and Chavis team, re-addressed the original work with a much more spiritual, and thus holistic flavour. Maton has written on this this theme of transcendence over time (Maton 1989; Maton and Pargamont, 1987). The 'founder' of PSoC, Seymour Sarason, has commented on it intermittently (e.g. Sarason, 1986, 1993).

Dokecki, Newbrough and O'Gorman (2001) have done collaborative work with faith-based organisations, and have drawn on the writing of Browning to develop holistic change processes that incorporate PSoC and spirituality. However, by far the most prolific area of publication within community psychology over the last 15 years has been on 'liberating the oppressed' – that is, research and intervention given to assist minority groups. The description of such practise was clearly articulated by Rappaport, with his presentations of empowerment and examplars of prevention (1981, 1987, 1990).

From 'empowerment' to 'social justice'

Of late, such considerations of empowerment have been framed into the rhetoric of 'social justice'. The tone of some of this writing has become, I believe, almost presumptuous during this period. Almost like the prophets of old, authors have found a group of citizens in almost every country that have become the assumed equivalent to the Old Testaments' 'widows, fatherless and aliens'… To locate such a group is to automatically find a cause that can be championed. To question the motive for helping a group in such a situation is to be heretical to the heart of social progress. To express critical questions of the resulting program is to be intolerant of the noble quest to 'at least do something'.

Such a challenge as I have just expressed is framed, admittedly, in overstatement. Yet it seems to me that the tone and tenor of a lot of writing these days is somewhat closed or one-sided. To question any of the tenets of

liberation and social justice is almost to risk the label of being a red-necked reactionary.

One of the most literate authors about the social justice approach currently is Isaac Prillentensky (2001). He does try to keep a genuinely holistic approach to social justice theory. He admits levels of critical questioning in his frameworks that allow for consideration of core values, and even ethics. Nelson and Prillentensky (2005) devoted a text to the bringing together of (community) psychology, liberation and well-being.

Some issues with social justice

However, I believe that even this more sophisticated approach has difficulty answering the following questions:

a)   How do we clearly define who is oppressed?

b)   What standards do we use to define what is an improvement for this group?

c)   In relation to (a), how do we clearly articulate who is responsible for the difficulties (oppression) of this group? And

d)   How do we intervene without assuming that we have THE knowledge and skills to actually socially engineer an improvement?

This situation was illustrated in one session of the 2005 Australian Psychological Society's Annual Conference. A presenter described a group whom she believed were being disadvantaged. Such disadvantage was being framed in the language of oppression, and assistance to them was therefore automatically seen as noble.

However, some of us present were not convinced. Indeed, assistance to the group in question could have equally been considered as blatantly unfair to other groups in this social system. This was similar to what has been observed by ED Hirsch (1999), with reference to the American education system. He clearly showed that attempts to help minority groups in the USA's education system, by lowering educational achievement entry standards for

them, was actually formalising social injustice further, whilst claiming to be acting on behalf of social justice.

Let me give another real-life example. I work in a community, faith-based school. Let me ask this question of you – who are the oppressed in such a community? After listening to every group with a vested interest in such a setting, I have concluded that I can define <u>every</u> subgroup as oppressed.

Let me illustrate this state of affairs. Think about whether each group is actually oppressed (partially or wholly), what standards you would use to determine this, who or what is responsible for the oppression, and what might improve the lot of the oppressed:

a) The *students* can be defined as the oppressed very easily. They may be a majority in numerical terms, yet they are the least consulted, and have less voice and choice than any other group. They could claim, up to 14years and 9 months, that schools are places of detention, rather than places of attention;

b) The *parents* seem to have some choice and voice in schools. However, once they have placed their students in a particular school, they have very little influence on daily life within the school. This psychological distance grows dramatically as the students enter secondary school;

c)   The *teachers* believe that their work life is one of very little influence. They are disempowered from influence in curriculum, financial structures and administrative demands. Plus, both State and Federal governments have a seemingly spiralling list of demands that range from OHS, Child Protection, Academic Benchmarks, compulsory syllabus contents and structures, and when to fly flags and where to hang compulsory posters;

d) The *principal* and executive staff feel caught between administering these demands, and somehow supporting teachers, involving (and sometimes pacifying) parents, disciplining extreme conduct patterns, managing budgets, and then inspiring everyone to aim higher!

Because this case study is in the context of independent schooling, there is also the matter of working with a Board of Governors that may be composed of well-meaninged, but not fully equipped, lay people;

e) The *Board* itself can feel distanced and uncertain if it has a 'hands off' approach, or is accused of interfering if they step in too close to management situations. They therefore also feel disempowered to make any real difference as they also wrestle with government and union demands, and Executive staff who may or may not trust them.

So who gets your vote? And if you support one group as the oppressed, requiring social justice intervention, what would you say to the other ones?

Some forgotten conceptual issues

It seems to me that social justice theory has not yet come to grips with two fundamental issues. These are:

1. Picking up a group, as an oppressed collection of individuals, still needs some assessment against a criteria of *what is good* and constructive in conduct and relationship, and what is bad and destructive in conduct and relationship. It seems that our theories of 'victim blaming' have made us timid in describing conduct (and character) that is simply unhelpful in human relationship. This timidity has also be fanned by the policies of relativist multiculturalism, which inhibits social observers in describing helpful and unhelpful patterns of behaviour across cultures and ethnic groups; and the practise of political correctness, which forces people to use words that comply to a certain ideology, even in the face of empirical observations to the contrary (Ellis, 2004). For example, I've recently experienced two psychological assessments where the 'victims' stories' were not submitted to any form of realty testing, with highly questionable conclusions ensuing. At a broader contextual level, Nelson and Prillentensky (2005) outlined questions for assessing the values inherent in community psychology activities. Their questions (p. 65) do address both

care/compassion and social justice in general terms, but there is no external referent point given to test the validity of the claims;

2. The fundamental tension between the *One Vs. the Many*. This is the core compromise of social relationship. PSoC can only occur when individual needs are heard and responded to in a just and compassionate way. However, the concepts of justice and compassion must have an agreed understanding across all of the involved groups ("The criteria is whether people can experience a sense of community that permits a productive compromise between the needs of individuals and the achievement of group goals", Sarason, 1974, p. 155. See also Newbrough, 1992, 1995). A related neglected concept within this realm of thinking is the 'myth of limited resources' (Sarason, & Lorentz, 1979). Even in this age of environmental sensitivity, we tend to forget that there is only so much to go around, and that not all problems can be satisfactorily satisfied to each individual's likes. We could currently send everyone to bed at night without being hungry. We cannot currently provide first class health care for everyone on the planet.

Where is our society at in handling this tension? Ideally, individuals are to enjoy the benefits of society without taking advantage of others. The State should preserve good and restrain evil – at the individual and group level. However, I believe that the notion of justice has been altered. It has moved from being what the individual deserved, based on an agreed definition of good and bad, to doing what will change the individual, and minimise the risk of recidivism. That is, if someone's circumstances are considered unhelpful to them reaching their potential, then they (the individual, or a class or group of individuals) are considered to be less culpable for their actions, because they are oppressed. The social science intervention emphasis therefore shifts from helping within a clear sense of right and wrong, to a socially determined program of help according to minimising harm (and sometimes, fault).

This shift goes one-step further than the distinction between murder and manslaughter, where intentionality is brought to bear on the consequence. In these contemporary and relativistic times, social determinism can be used to remove some, most, or all of the culpability.

The need for balance between the Individual and the State

When the State (via its philosophers and ideologically driven social scientists) adjusts definitions in these ways, it impacts the mediating structures that have traditionally helped keep the balance between the Individual and the State. These community-based structures provide the social regularities, within activity settings, that assist young people internalise a conscience that society considers good. In contrast to enhancing mediating structures, social justice theory, like its cousin liberation theology, can work to deconstruct the impact of these structures, in order to avoid the perceived debilitating impacts of negative self-definition that arises from them. The question is whether, in the absence of a clear understanding of right and wrong that transcends the Individual and the Society, one can do this without undermining that core that holds society together?

So on the side of the Individual, we have an increasing message of blaming the society, to avoid the (often valid) difficulty of blaming the victim. This way of thought enhances individualism (Kolakowski, 1990), and weakens the opportunity for connectedness and belonging, by removing conditions for commitment to the mediating structures of society. As Sarason (1986) asked:

> Therefore, one must ask what price has been paid in the substitution of the concepts of morals and values for that of sin as a transgression of divine law? I would suggest as have many others, that the price we paid was in the weakening of the sense of interconnectedness among the individual, the collectivity and ultimate purpose and meaning of human existence (p. 159).

On the side of the Many, we have State authorities that increasingly believe their own political rhetoric that they are to be the ones to fix all social problems, at every level of society. This enhances belief in the need for

centralised control of educational, health and welfare activity settings (O'Donnell et al., 1993), and also reduces the perceived importance of mediating structures.

Newbrough (1992, 1995) was referred to above as one example of an author who has commented on this tension between the One Vs the Many, and the desirable need to transform this tension to a complementarity of the One AND the Many. I suggest that a way forward might be to pause and think about the relationship between justice and compassion. Social justice theory, as currently promoted, and even though driven by noble motives, is too devoid of the pursuit of truth – and therefore its definitions of what is helpful, or good, or compassionate, are so allusive as to breed partisan jealousies rather than genuine unity. It is one reason why many have turned to its opposite – an unlistening fundamentalism (political and/or religious).

Some Biblical principles

Biblically, justice and compassion stand as complementarities if they are both considered as gifts from the Creator – and therefore, as a reason to live in gratitude to Him for revealing both realities to us. This is the person-in-relationship mode of living called worship. Brueggemann (1982), and Hanson (1986) have described this triadic framework of Biblical community very clearly.

Justice (or righteousness), as exemplified by Torah, provides the boundaries whereby safe relationships can be attempted. If justice and righteousness is only used forcefully, without a listening ear, it becomes harsh legalism, and all of those under its influence are by definition oppressed. What does the Bible teach as the relational principle to prevent this extreme? It is that the reasons for this justice are *disclosed* from the Creator. Justice can therefore be addressed impartially, to both the rich and the poor (see Exodus 23).

The Prophetic writings are the *disruptive* voice that does not allow the community to sit uncaringly in its disclosed Torah. Those who are not protected by the formal structures of society (the widows, the fatherless and

the aliens) are to be shown compassion for their individual needs. No appeal to heritage or status is an excuse – not even religious heritage (see Jeremiah 7).

What stops such compassion becoming chaotic, in the face of seemingly endless individual need? In many societies, this extreme can be noted in the habit of systematic bribery along clan or tribal connections. The developed society's equivalent is playing favourites to gain advantage (against James 2). Political favouritism is another form of care for another person or persons that is disconnected from justice.

The Biblical protection from this extreme in social relationships is that care must be defined in terms of the Creator's moral principles for life. Biblically, the primary principle is that compassion ('charity' in older translations) is the driving principle for being just (Knox, 1989, Chapter 6). For to live justly, whilst doing mercy, enables a principled life (faithfulness and humility – Micah 6:8 and Matthew 23:23). The Biblical assumption, of course, is that this only works profoundly when connected to the Creator – i.e. when both of these good relationship principles are properly accredited to Him, and the response to both are done in gratitude to Him. This is called living wisely, and the spirit of this is thus encapsulated in the *discernment* of the Wisdom writings.

This is in contrast to the 'transformative interventions' of Nelson and Prillentensky (2005, pp.144-145). They suggest that this deeper level of transformative intervention changes the actual social system, in contrast to simply enhancing well-being within the social system ('ameliorative intervention'). The former, more 'liberating' strategy, emphasises power relationships, self-determination, and other oppressed-linked self-defining concepts. Again, there is no reference to any notion of Truth, or the role of Transcendence, or any Natural Law – the things that make us distinctly human in our reasoning and our living (i.e. our distinctly human logic, belief systems and morality). Without such an external reference point, we are simply going back to species based social collusion (called consensus), that comes down to who has the most influence at any given point of time – or to

put it more provocatively, decisions are based on a 'language driven law of the jungle'.

I claimed earlier that social justice theory, as currently articulated, is sometimes lop-sided. It seems that its motive can often come from being fuelled by an anger of indignation, reminiscent of a form of Marxism. Whilst acknowledging that Marx learnt his belief of an inevitable order and ultimate good from his Christian heritage (Fuller, 1960), his urgings to social disruption (revolution) come from other sources.

A theory of just compassion

Thus I come to the term *just compassion*. It is constructed in a way to remind us that justice and compassion must go hand in hand. Compassion is the ultimate motive for care (note the 'hesed' of the OT). Justice provides the possibility of testing our actions against criteria for good. Compassion on its own leads to favouritism, sentimentalism and emotionalism (the 'squeaky wheel gets the oil' phenomenon). Justice on its own leads to harshness, legalism and neglect of those unable to help themselves (what we call the 'oppressed'). Divorced from their Source, both can become idolatry. Acknowledged as coming from the Source, both become liberating agents of social change. As one community psychologist described:

> The personal community has its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and, because it submerges neither the social (as in the mechanistic), nor the individual (as in the organic), it avoids both the alienated individual and the totalitarian state (Dokecki, 1992, p. 31).

This heritage is what is available to help avoid "rampant individualism and suffocating collectivism" (Sarason, 1986, p.905). C.S. Lewis noted that to divorce the natural understanding of the common good from its Source is to leave us in the hands of the social engineers, and will lead to a society of leaders without chests ('The Abolition of Man').

Our times can be described as the best and worst of times – and part of the worst side is the struggle to keep the balance between the One And the Many

in some kind of equilibrium. Biblically, the neglect of the 'First Tablet' (Commandments 1 to 4, relating to worship of God) has lead to serious challenges of the 'Second Tablet' (Commandments 5 to 10, relating to human relationships). Here are two examples of the latter:

Number 5: Respect for authority (honour parents) – when people neglect this foundational relationship principle of life, they are more prone to allow any means to achieve their ends. Individuals who ignore this principle interpret all things through their perceived needs. When government authorities ignore this principle, they have made themselves the ultimate authority, rather than the upholder of authority delegated from the Source of Life. This is because any form of this consensus type of formal authority can be re-interpreted into a perspective that has as its prime focus self-utility, rather than doing what is (Biblically) right. When anti-abortionists hurt abortionists, those individuals have engaged in such conduct; when preachers are put in prison for teaching their point of view, the State has engaged in such conduct. Australian young people, due to their (exaggerated?) sense of egalitarianism, often express their lack of understanding of this principle when they disbelieve that those in authority at home, school or work, can in fact ask them to do something they do not like to do, and then implement (unpleasant) consequences if the teenager does not comply.

Number 6: Do not murder – the positive resumptions of this commandment are that we are to protect and promote life. However, whenever and wherever human life is considered optional and owned by the individual or the State (or in the case of feminist perspectives on abortion, the foetus being owned by the mother alone), then euthanasia, convenience abortion, and ultimately suicide will be increasingly approved. People with this perspective will believe that they are delivering liberating options to an oppressed group (the terminally sick, the pregnant woman, the entrapped individual); those who believe in the principle encompassed in Commandment 6 will see such actions as humans operating at a less than a human (and humane) level of relationship and society.

With reference to these principles in the second tablet, one can ask the following: How is one to care for another, or a group of people, if universal

respect for others and their life is not granted? How can people be helped to 'be free' if freedom cannot be described, and then agreed upon?

Faithfulness, integrity of our word, and contentment are other relational ethics inherent in the Ten Commandments, and they are similarly being challenged by the uncertainty of a moral centre for our society. These challenges will similarly create mute points about how to define who is oppressed, and how then we should proceed to liberate them.

Conclusion – a call to faithfulness

None of these reflections are in any way meant to approve inaction for the hungry and abused of our world. For my part however, I would prefer to be identified with a William Wliberforce, an Edmund Bourke, or a Martin Luther King than with a centralist government's social engineering for equal outcomes. The former were being responsive to One greater than the sum of any parts. I believe that they were therefore representing a fuller expression of humanity. The latter are responding to a memory of good that has been modified by social consensus politics. They believe that they have enough knowledge to plan, implement and evaluate a better future. Wildavsky (1973) has reminded us that this is properly the domain of theology, and not the social planners. This is because faithfulness to Truth keeps us human, and not cleverness with information. Similarly, authors such as Hare (2002) have reminded us that trying to define good without God is less than satisfactory.

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