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A New Role for Psychology: Working With Disadvantaged Persons in a College Setting

(A Position Paper)

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The social revolution of our times is creating a challenge for the educator and the psychologist. Persons from disadvantaged socio-economic and cultural backgrounds are demanding an opportunity for college-level education.

The majority of these students do not meet the minimum scholarship standards required for admission at the time they make their initial application. In some cases, of course, this is due to lack of intellectual and scholastic ability. However, in other cases, the lack of achievement is related to the inadequacies of our educational system and to certain psychological and cultural characteristics of these persons.

We do not presently have adequate instruments or methods to help us differentiate between educable and non-educable disadvantaged persons. Perhaps the most effective method of selection is a protracted and individualized entrance process -- which may last a year or longer -- during which we can determine whether a student can reasonably expect to matriculate and eventually earn a baccalaureate degree, by assessing changes in the student's scholastic performance.

In order to remedy past academic deficiencies, the City College Pre-Baccalaureate Program was devised to provide an educational curriculum which integrates remedial and college level work. Course work alone, however, is not sufficient to maximize chances for college success.

Colleges are basically middle class oriented institutions. There is little in the background of disadvantaged students which prepares them to compete successfully in such an environment. Success in college for these persons may require a massive change in personality, daily routines, habits and values.

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How can psychologists contribute to the higher education of disadvantaged persons? Four interrelated areas of functions appear to be relevant:

1. Assessment of educability
2. Facilitation of ego development
3. Psychotherapy
4. Assisting the faculty

#### Assessment of Educability

Good high school grades are usually indicative of intellectual ability, appropriate motivation for academic success, adequate study skills, and a supportive environment. Low grades in high school, however, can be caused by any or all of these variables being deficient. If we assume that, with the exception of intelligence, the other dimensions are potentially changeable, we begin to appreciate the exceedingly complex task we face in determining educability in a culturally disadvantaged person. We must also realize that a disadvantaged student can be harmed not only by being discouraged from obtaining college-level education, but also through inappropriate encouragement which results in failure.

Assessment of educability in this context becomes a continuous process in which the student and the psychologist closely collaborate. The psychologist must provide not only support and encouragement, but he must also continuously assist with reality testing. He must communicate a feeling of acceptance and respect for the person, regardless of his level of academic achievement. He must be familiar with the academic curriculum and the educational process. He must be knowledgeable about occupational alternatives; and when sufficient evidence becomes available indicating that a student is not educable on the college level, the psychologist must help him to utilize the college experience constructively in finding an alternate vocational objective.

#### Facilitation of Ego-Development

It would be erroneous to classify all disadvantaged students as a homogeneous group. There are many families of sufficient strength to combat

the effects of slum dwelling; and the children of these families reflect the strength of their homes in school performance and adjustment to life. The majority of disadvantaged students, however, come from homes with a high incidence of social and family pathology. They frequently come from broken homes due to separation and desertion -- homes with unstable identification figures and unstable community ties. By the time they enter college, many disadvantaged students have developed negative self-images. Although they aspire to high prestige occupations, few realistically expect to achieve such goals. They are not personally acquainted with anyone who has achieved success; so while they may overtly express confidence, they are convinced that "people like me don't have a chance to be successful in life." They cannot anticipate the attainment of long-range goals, and they lack the ability to postpone gratification of immediate needs in order to achieve remote and perhaps abstract goals. They don't feel that they can control their own destiny, and they therefore abandon responsibility for themselves.

A minority group member who wishes to become socially mobile through educational achievement is faced with the prospect of rejection by his peer group as his behavior deviates from theirs; and he does not have any security that he will be accepted by the group toward which he aspires. Disadvantaged youngsters are apt to view all authority, including college staff, with suspicion and sometimes outward hostility.

A person's adjustment to situational events is a learned response. Under favorable conditions, a person achieves increasing autonomy from his instinctual drives and his environment as he develops. In a well-developed person, there is an appropriate balance between autonomy from forces within and autonomy from the environment. As the individual develops ego autonomy, he becomes aware of his ability to control his own behavior and his environment. He is a person who can adapt himself to new situations relatively easily.

Persons growing up in a deprived environment frequently fail to develop sufficient ego autonomy. Their ability to respond to new situations adaptively is impaired. Consequently, students from disadvantaged backgrounds cannot easily acclimate themselves to the college environment.

How can psychologists help these students, who are not "asking" for help and whose difficulties in living are not based on unconscious conflicts, but who are insufficiently adaptive to the college situation? How can they develop a "helping relation" to establish a feeling of trust and to relieve hostility, suspicion, apathy and other feelings which may detract from the student's ability to profit from college instruction? How can psychologists help these persons to identify appropriate goals, to develop appropriate self-images and find socially useful roles to play as adults? How can they help these students to establish realistic levels of aspiration? How can they help them to expand their environment and orient themselves to the larger environment and build some sense of general trust in it?

As a first step, the psychologist must find a way to become involved intimately in the life of the student. Ego development must take place in an emotional context. It is the emotional rather than the intellectual attitudes which are the raw material of this process. Ego development inevitably involves relationships between people. The psychologist cannot wait for the student to initiate this relationship. It is important, however, that this strategy not be experienced as one of attempting to socialize students or of encouraging them to accept roles presented by the majority world.

In the Pre-Baccalaureate Program, the role of the psychologist is structured to facilitate interaction with students in order to facilitate the initiation of a relationship. The psychologist is a central figure. He informs the student of his acceptance into the program. He then works out with the student a course schedule. They prepare a budget and a request for a weekly stipend, where such aid is required (which is in most cases). The psychologist plays an active and

continuous role in the student's life. Through this role he substitutes for the father figure, who frequently has no adequate role in the student's life or who is entirely absent.

One must realize, however, that the assumption of this role can also be frightening to the student. While a dependent relationship at this stage is useful, one must be careful about overdependence. The student is seen weekly. By demonstrating interest and readiness to help, one begins to provide a basis for trust. As the psychologist remains a person who is predictable and non-punitive, trust can be increased, and later transferred from the psychologist to other people in the outside environment of the student. During this phase, the student is confronted with how he is different from the other students in terms of academic preparation. The psychologist makes clear to the student that what has occurred is not the result of inferiority, worthlessness or inability. They begin to explore together ways of overcoming the academic deficiencies and they prepare a plan of action. This helps the student to reality test and encourages him by introducing the concept that his present state will pass. He is also helped to recognize his potential ability. The student must discover his limits through competitive action in this supportive environment.

As the student becomes aware of his academic ability, he gains confidence in himself. His previous unwillingness to commit himself to any action which would have definite ending in either success or failure decreases. The psychologist's job at this point is to open up possibilities for the student by giving him information and helping him to interpret what he knows about the world around him. He also assists the student in recognizing how his choices are a reflection of how he feels about himself. The behavior requirements for a successful career in college must be made explicit. Under such conditions, the system can be accepted or rejected. Consequences of accepting or rejecting them can be further considered. This facilitates the students' recognition of the fact that they do have control over their future and can change their environment. As

students form clear and realistic goals, they begin to perceive some significance for themselves in what they are asked to learn. Through positive experiences in the learning situation, motivation increases.

The strategy is to assist the student's reality test in a supportive environment through experiences of success. It starts out with a substantially dependent relationship. As ego development and ego autonomy increases, the individual begins to form more realistic goals and adapts more effectively to the college environment. A by-product of this process is a development of social skills, an increased ability to get along with others and a more effective handling of internal and interpersonal conflicts. During this process, the student and the psychologist must work through the dependent relationship. We work in a framework where the student is ultimately free and responsible to make choices in regard to the kind of person he wants to be. We must be aware, however, that in this situation, the psychologist's values and personality structure offer a model for identification on which to build his own personality.

#### Psychotherapy

This writer chose to discuss "Facilitation of Ego Development" and "Psychotherapy" separately. Admittedly, however, this is a somewhat artificial division, since there are essential similarities between the two categories, and they are perhaps a continuum of one another. In working with any single person, the psychologist may have to engage in both activities at any one time or at different times. The differentiation, however, is expected to facilitate conceptualization of the problems.

The term psychotherapy is restricted here to situations where the following conditions exist:

1. Presence of anxiety
2. Awareness of some "problem" or "conflict"
3. Willingness to change something about themselves
4. The problem is of intra-psychic nature and the process of change

is concerned primarily with the irrational and unconscious.

There are very few disadvantaged students who initially meet the above criteria and who initiate a contact for psychotherapy. During the "facilitation of ego development", however, a more clearly psychotherapeutic relationship may develop. In our experience, about ten percent of those we work with actually end up in psychotherapy. Psychotherapy with these persons is in general similar to conventional psychotherapy, with some important exceptions.

In psychotherapy, the therapist must meet the individual on his own level, no matter who they are. In our work with disadvantaged persons, it cannot be too strongly emphasized that there is a prime necessity to fully understand the cultural background. In the absence of such understanding, differences in linguistic styles can become a deterrent to communication and understanding between psychologist and student. It is helpful to explicitly enlist the aid of the patient at the very outset to help us in understanding him. It must be kept in mind that a person from the lower socio-economic class is less likely to think in terms of abstractions and more likely to think in terms of concrete things.

The common denominator of all therapies of whatever theoretical persuasion is the establishment of an object relationship. Patients in their fantasies want their therapist to be their "father". The therapist in conventional therapy does not permit the relationship to have reality for the patient. With patients from disadvantaged backgrounds, their wishes have to be granted in the early phase. The therapist becomes "mother" and "father" inasmuch as we must deal with the realities of the patient's life, his daily events. We must keep in mind the fact that frequently it is not the patient's perception of reality that is distorted, but the reality itself. The therapist must intrude into the life of the patient and participate in his decision-making. We must also realize that even when the perception of a disadvantaged person is apparently distorted from our vantage point and has all the signs of projection, it may not be an individual but

a cultural distortion, and as such appears real in its social context. Thus, it is quite resistant to reality testing and change. A frequent response from these students is "You don't understand me and my people". At that point, it is perhaps best not to push it any further, in order to avoid separation. An appropriate response may simply be, "I hope you will help me to better understand you."

It is important to be aware of and in touch with our tendencies to feel guilty and embarrassed about the abuse and deprivation these students and their families have been subjected to. Without this awareness on the part of the therapist, the student may defeat his therapy through the use of his "deprivation", and get by without doing the required therapeutic work. It is also important that the psychologist not react to the student's hostility by exasperation or withdrawal, but by continued interest. Though lateness or absenteeism from sessions are important factors in therapy, we must keep in mind that the meaning of such actions to these persons is not quite the same as it is to middle class persons. So while such behavior would still have to be dealt with in therapy, a greater degree of flexibility and very clear, explicit limits are indicated.

There are many cases where the difficulties of an individual from a deprived background represent reactions to his environment, i.e., the person or persons with whom he is required to interact closely, like his family. The individual's growth toward health is obstructed; yet he himself cannot take the initiative and dissolve the pathology-producing relationship because it satisfies important needs; and he is reluctant to forego these satisfactions for the risk of starting anew. The efforts in these cases have to be directed toward an exploration of the needs which are being gratified in the present environment, and toward an analysis of the anxieties concerning the projected

change in life setting. Frequently the student is able to gain understanding into the reasons for his remaining in his unhealthy milieu and becomes able to effect a move on his own initiative, or he may become more effective in dealing with his current environment.

#### Assisting the Faculty

The role of the psychologist in the Pre-Baccalaureate Program includes a close working relationship with the classroom teachers. We are trying to individualize instruction as much as possible. Helping the teacher to understand his students is invaluable, especially since teaching disadvantaged persons so often depends on the interpersonal ingredient between the student and his teacher.

As in therapy, students subject their instructors to considerable testing, to which the instructors often tend to react with considerable hostility. Some teachers feel guilt toward the disadvantaged student; and instead of teaching them, they want to "take care of them". To love them, however, is not enough. In fact, this kind of attitude is often a cover for prejudice, resentment and lack of trust in the ability of these students to achieve success on the college level. At times teachers who started out with great enthusiasm become resentful, apathetic and ready to diagnose their students as uneducable when the students fail to respond "sufficiently". Teaching in the Pre-Baccalaureate Program is not a high prestige position in the academic departments; and this further contributes to the insecurities of the teacher.

The psychologist cannot and does not engage the instructor in psychotherapy. The focus remains on the individual student. The psychologist acts as an agent of reality testing by asking questions and exploring alternatives in working with the student. He supports the teacher by expressing his appreciation for the difficult role the teacher must play. He

offers his understanding of the student, which may facilitate teaching him. The psychologist may also encourage and assist the instructor in an experimental approach to teaching.

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