

COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY IN INDIA: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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Abstract

This paper discusses the distinctive nature of the specialism of counselling psychology and outlines the development of the discipline in India in the context of international developments and its recognition as a professional branch of applied psychology. Today, counselling psychologists are employed in varied clinical and non-clinical settings including health and mental health services (statutory, private and voluntary sector) along with education, forensic, justice, industry and private practices. Counselling psychologist is the primary professional identity of many practicing psychologists in India. Focus on facilitating personal and interpersonal functioning across the life span and its emphasis on the therapeutic process, the specialism continues to bridge the disciplines of psychology, counselling and psychotherapy. In this paper, some of the challenges still faced by counselling psychology are explored as it navigates its way through the changing landscape of further development and evolution.

Keywords: counselling psychologists; evidence-based practice; professional identity; mental health; scope of practice; psychological therapy

INTRODUCTION

Counselling needs in the Indian context emerge against the background of tremendous social change. Counselling services are poorly defined and presently anyone at all with little or no training can offer these services. At the present counselling services are largely based on Western approaches to psychology. These approaches have been widely criticized as not being relevant to the Indian cultural context. Counselling today was embedded within a complex support system of social relationships. The ancient guru-shishya (teacher-disciple) parampara (tradition) epitomises this relationship within which the guru (or elder) carried the responsibility of “forming” and “shaping” the lives of students. Over the centuries the central position of this venerable institution has gradually been eroded and lost. Today, elder and young person, parent and child, teacher and student are equally at a loss when faced with the bewildering changes that have swept across this ancient land.

A review of the development and current status of counselling psychology in India must be located within a discourse about the wider philosophic issues that undergird psychology as a discipline. Contributions of Western psychology, with its scientific orientation, and traditional Indian psychology, with its intuitive and experience-based approach.

Psychology until the latter part of the 19th century was subsumed under the far-reaching branches of philosophy, and psychologists lived in the borderland between metaphysics and science. Psychology found its independence from philosophy when Wilhelm Wundt through his psychological laboratory in Leipzig was able to demonstrate that human behaviour could indeed be the subject matter of empiricism. Psychology committed itself in a very fundamental manner to the position that assertions that have no empirical consequences, are not characterised by regularity of cause and effect, and are not verifiable or objectively replicable, in effect, fall outside its purview. Psychology actively sought to distinguish itself from theology and metaphysics by adopting the inductive process of scientific reasoning based on the objective verification of facts through experimentation and unbiased observation. Psychology thereby separated itself from its earlier preoccupation with the “soul” and committed itself instead to the study of “behaviour”.

Western, academic psychology or “mainstream” psychology was introduced to India about 75 years ago. While this is indicative of a substantial growth in quantitative terms, the usefulness of psychology to the Indian context has not been clearly evident and the discipline has not advanced in India as it has in the Western world.

One of the reasons cited for this apparent lassitude and lack of relevance is that the practice of modern psychology in India has tied to the apron strings of the West. Research has by and large been replicative and practice quite often seems disconnected from felt needs. In one of his reviews the late Durganand Sinha, a well-known Indian psychologist, pointed out that very little originality has been displayed and that Indian research has added hardly anything to the body of psychological knowledge (Sinha, 1993). While this situation has changed to some extent over the recent past, psychology in India has still not found its Indian roots and at best has remained a poor copy of Western psychology, showing little relevance to the social realities that prevail in the country.

TRADITIONAL INDIAN PSYCHOLOGY

In ancient Indian texts that pertain to the mind, behaviour, emotions, perception, cognitions, personality, traits, and a host of such psychological constructs. Psychology is not new to Indian thought, and ancient Indian writings both in the Vedic and Buddhist literature are replete with sophisticated psychological concepts and systems that provide clear evidence for the existence of a traditional Indian psychology or *Mano (mind) Vidya (knowledge)*. A number of these psychological concepts and intervention techniques bear a startling resemblance to ideas put forth by modern Western psychology and yet predate these efforts. Taking a life-span approach, this ancient description provides guidelines for the discharging of specific duties and occupational roles as one progresses through the stages of life. The production of wealth and the pursuit of personal prosperity are described as a life duty. The crucial point to be noted is that these activities are described as belonging to a certain stage in the course of the individual's growth and development. The preoccupation with personal gain and personal pleasures is expected to wane after its purpose is served. Living life to the full is described as having other targets and objectives. The individual is expected to pass through and grow beyond material and physical desires and move toward the realisation of other, higher, spiritual aspects of the self (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004). The Triguna theory described in 600 BC could well be described as a three-factor description of personality types, according to which the human personality comprises three gunas or qualities—*sattwa, rajas, and tamas*. This formed the basis for guiding young people toward occupational roles for which they were suited, echoing what we would call career counselling today (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004). The Bhagavad Gita which was written around 200 BC is central to the Hindu scriptures. This writing is a description of interaction between a confused and anxious military leader, Arjuna, and his spiritual mentor, Lord Krishna, and provides perhaps one of the earliest illustrations of the effect of cognitions on emotions and behaviour and subsequently describes how counselling could reorient a person to deal effectively with life tasks (Kuppuswamy, 1985). Psychosomatics forms a significant portion of the Ayurvedic (Indian traditional medicine) approach to healing with detailed descriptions of how emotions are linked to both physical illnesses and psychological disturbances (Ajaya, 1983). This glimpse into India's ancient past makes it abundantly clear that a vibrant psychological tradition had developed in parallel with Western efforts within the same field. The task before us now is to briefly examine the philosophic underpinnings upon which traditional Indian psychology rests.

Western psychology has taken the empirical and objective approach and worked strenuously at moving away from theology, metaphysics, and subjective experience. In contrast, traditional Indian psychology has taken a diametrically opposite course. Subjective experience and intuition are given primacy over objective observations and measurements. In the same manner that Western psychology is committed to the deployment of techniques to make valid and reliable objective observations, the Indian tradition has developed a wide variety of methods to sharpen the quality and reliability of inner, subjective observations. These methods are many and vary across schools of thought. But at the core, they rest on a "particular combination of concentration and detachment, leading to an attentive, one would almost say, 'objective', inner silence" (Cornelissen, 2001, p. 5).

Training opportunities for counselling skills are available through the university system and through the private initiatives of voluntary organisations and human resource development firms. A wide variety of courses have become available over the last few years that range from full-time postgraduate degree programmes to certificates and diplomas. Postgraduate degrees are offered by only a large number of university departments of psychology, education, and social work. Private organisations also offer postgraduate diplomas and certificates in specific branches of counselling. Certificate courses in counselling are also available through the distance education mode.

India has quite a large number of professional bodies and associations of psychology. The most well known are the Indian Association of Clinical Psychologists, the Indian Psychological Association, the Indian Academy of Applied Psychologists, the National Academy of Psychology, and the Indian Psychoanalytical Society. Most of these associations publish their own journals (e.g. Indian Journal of Clinical Psychology, Journal of the Indian Association of Applied Psychology). They also hold annual conferences.

Psychology in India has been excessively dependent on Western psychology. Although significant resources were directed toward research, the relevance of counselling to the Indian social and cultural context does not seem to have been the focus of this research. The attempt seems to have been to adopt Western concepts with little or no consideration for “discovering” new approaches and validating them for the Indian situation. India has not as yet defined the parameters for counsellor qualifications. An alarming trend seen as a result is that “counselling” is a term that is loosely used. In India, a counselling service could be offered by anyone at all. Quite often, well intentioned individuals and social service clubs who are “interested in helping others” assume the role of counsellors. In the school/college context, this is a responsibility often carried by the teacher or lecturer who is deputized to be the student welfare officer.

The nature and scope of counselling itself seems to remain poorly understood. Courses in rehabilitation, career guidance, marital problems, HIV/AIDS, school mental health, or life skills all fall under the rubric of “counselling”. An evaluation of the organisational structure described above reveals that government-sponsored guidance bureaus have not been able to make much headway—the reasons cited being the paucity of funds and the lukewarm attitude towards counselling on the part of state educational authorities (Bhatnagar & Gupta, 1999). While organisational arrangements have provided for structures (e.g. Guidance Bureaus at the State and Central levels) and positions (e.g. Vocational Guidance Officers), through which at least some form of counselling could be rendered, these cadres have fallen into disuse. Although systems for service delivery have been set up, little has been done to optimise their effective operation. The services of private organisations, however, are restricted to specific geographical areas and have not been able to expand their services to a national scale. Furthermore, these services are concentrated almost exclusively in the cities and most often target the higher economic status groups. The counselling needs of people from rural or less privileged backgrounds are poorly understood and most often left unaddressed. While an organizational structure for career counselling does exist in India, its scope seems to be quite limited.

WHERE DO COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGISTS WORK?

The unique identity, values, and roles of counselling psychologists lend themselves to a wide variety of work settings. Historically, counselling psychologists worked in college and university settings, business and industry, and government agencies. A trend that started in the late 70s and has continued on through the 80s and into the 90s is the increase in the diversity of settings in which the counselling psychologist works (Fitzgerald & Osipow, 1986; Zimpfer, 1993). Thus, research has indicated that counselling psychologists have moved well beyond their historical roots into settings such as independent practice, community health centers, general hospitals, mental hospitals, outpatient clinics, and medical schools (Watkins, Lopez, Campbell, & Himmel, 1986, as cited in Gelso & Fretz, 1992; Zimpfer, 1993).

This growth has been justified in a number of ways. Some have argued that counselling psychologists are better equipped than other mental health professionals to work in a broad range of settings due to the multiplicity of tools that they have on hand (Meara, 1990). Others have argued that counselling psychology's move into traditional mental health settings provides the opportunity to make counselling psychology's contribution to mental health more visible and better understood (Myers, 1982).

Does this expansion into mental health work settings suggest that counselling psychology is moving away from its roots? Sprinthall (1990) suggests that the move to more clinical settings which are embedded in a medical model may “eliminate both our uniqueness and independent professional identity.” Again this struggle parallels that of women and ethnic minorities. Can a woman work in a traditionally male occupation and do it as a woman would, or must she learn to be like a man?

Just as women are changing the structure of the workplace (Russell, 1994) counselling psychologist's entry into medical settings can change the structure of those settings. For example, the most powerful way to deconstruct the medical model is from within. Remediation, prevention, education, and development happen across a wide variety of settings. Those counselling psychologists who choose to work in more medically oriented settings can and undoubtedly are offering those clients an alternative form of treatment based upon the orientation and values of counselling psychology.

Of course, it cannot be denied that as is the case with any minority operating within a larger dominant society, there will be pressures upon the counselling psychologist to conform to the model of the dominant society. The only way to resist this pressure is through a strong sense of self-identity. It is through training programs that the professional identity of counselling students must support the development of a strong sense of the “counselling psychology self” so that counselling psychologists choosing to enter medical settings have the power to maintain their identity within those settings.

Another concern related to the broadening of work settings arises out of the fact that counselling psychology programs are often housed in faculties (colleges) of education. Some college administrators have raised some concern about the fact that many of the graduates of these programs are not working in traditional educational settings. The concern here appears to be that such a change in work settings reflects a movement away from the

educational focus of these institutions. As it happens, counselling psychology is, in this context, exhibiting and promoting an enhanced and expansive vision of education. Education is a lifelong developmental process which happens in a wide variety of settings. As previously stated, counselling psychologists' educational and developmental role as a basic part of their role and identity, both of which are consistent with the mission of colleges of education. Thus, as counselling psychologists increase the number of work settings in which they are employed, they are expanding the role of education beyond traditional educational institutions. Indeed, counselling psychologists can be identified as pioneers in the field of education.

INDIAN AND WESTERN PSYCHOLOGY

Situated in the realms of theory and high philosophy, the salient features of two forms of psychological thought that have emerged in India from within two entirely different philosophic orientations. On the ground, the Indian reality demands a psychology of counselling that is relevant, culturally validated, and dynamic enough to accommodate the great variations that compose the Indian situation. We have at hand two great sources that could support this enterprise, namely, the traditional Indian and the Western approaches to psychology. A simplistic approach would be to reject one in favour of the other. This might be an easier approach and less fraught with pitfalls. Such a rejection would rob counselling psychology of the wisdom and experience of an entire body of knowledge. It can take a leaf out of the Eastern traditions and search for the golden mean in a spirit of equanimity. It is believed that the greatest opportunity that lies before us is to delve into these great traditions to discover a new way forward for counselling in India. Some of the key issues that surround this possibility are discussed below. The argument that Western psychology is materialistic to the point of reducing human beings to mere objects is perhaps true of the purest form of behaviorism and in that sense is a dated one. There have been revolutions within Western psychology that have critiqued this position and psychology has moved on to less mechanistic standpoints. The humanistic school, for example, takes a holistic view of the human being and reinstates the human individual to a position of primacy. The fact remains, however, that Western psychology is strongly rooted in materialistic individualism. These leanings may help retain its relevance to the western context, but may diminish its importance to the more collectivistic contexts of the east. It appears to me, however, that the rigour and unbiased objectivity that logical positivism has brought into Western psychology is one of its salient strengths. The fact that its epistemology is "outward looking", seeking to approach knowledge using the tools of reasoning and experimentation does not make it wrong. In fact it is such an approach that provides the opportunity to separate fact from superstition. Having said this, it must be stated that when Western psychologists see theirs as the only approach and are dismissive of methods and systems that have emerged from non-Western contexts, difficulties begin to rise. It is vital that Western psychology recognizes that "materialist reductionism is a puritan view; it clears out superstition, but in the end it sterilizes and leaves one with a bare, severely diminished remnant of reality" (Cornelissen, 2001). Turning to the traditional Indian approach, it is important to understand that the spirituality it describes is not intended to push the individual into an "other worldly" framework. This approach describes away of life that seamlessly combines the temporal and metaphysical, the material and spiritual. In fact traditional Indian psychology encourages a vigorous engagement with life. It is important to note that these ideas are not merely empty exhortations. Traditional Indian psychology offers a repertoire of practical techniques that facilitate the individual's journey through the stages of life. A critical weakness of traditional Indian psychology is that it is distant from the comprehension of the common man. Times have changed and today's life styles are dramatically different. A key challenge before the Indian psychologists is to bring these concepts into the grasp of Indians living in the here and now. Failing this, the incorporation of concepts from Indian psychology into a contemporary counselling framework could be written off as being irrelevant to modern life. A further threat to the traditional position is the myriad concepts and constructs that are put forth by the various schools of thought and the complex interactions between them. These interrelationships need to be articulated much more clearly. There also seems to be a lack of consistency and precision in the interpretation of concepts across writers. Descriptions of the term "consciousness" (a concept central to traditional Indian psychology) as a cognitive function, an emotion or a state of being by different writers illustrates this point. Further, some of the concepts of traditional Indian thought do not seem to be in synchrony with contemporary findings. Ideas for example that the seat of the mind is between the Siras (head) and Thalu (hard palate) or in the heart are essentially a throwback to a time when it was not necessary for conjecture to be supported by evidence. Ideas such as these must be re-examined and reinterpreted. There is an urgent need to develop a contemporary vocabulary for the expression of these ancient concepts. Restraint must be exercised when claims are made. Assertions, for example, that the first Indian civilisation is 1,900 million years old (Thapar & Witzel, 2006) serve only to give cause for skepticism. The opportunity that presents itself is not for the creation of an Indian or Western form of counselling. The danger here is to accord primacy to a certain concept simply because of the school to which it belongs. The three-factor description of personality based on three gunas (traits), for example, has been used to develop the Vedic Personality Inventory (Wolf, 1998). Similarly, there is now a concerted effort to develop psychological instruments based on concepts from traditional Indian psychology. If the motivation behind the construction of

these instruments does not go beyond the fact that they are just based on an Indian theory then nothing more has been achieved than the addition of yet another set of tests to the vast number that already exist. The task before us is not merely to raise the status of one form of psychology by directing attention and resources toward it. Instead the urgent requirement is to work toward developing a form of counselling that draws from these different traditions with the final objective of being relevant in a complex and changing world.

FUTURE TRENDS

In thinking about the future, we need to consider the issue of how counselling psychologists might continue to offer unique value to their clients. Specifically, we briefly identify three critical and inter-related areas that we believe present questions about our future as an applied discipline. These are:

(1) The place of evidence in practice; (2) the place of counselling psychology in an increasingly international market economy; and (3) how we add value to our clients. These are considered in turn.

1. Science and practice often end up in different worlds (Goldfried & Woolfe, 1996, 1998). For those who have consistently advocated the importance of a reciprocal relationship, this is deeply regrettable. The increasing trend towards evidence-based, or evidence-informed, practice should, therefore, be a source of pleasure to a science-based profession. However, it can become a source of regret and, at least when interpreted in an overly narrow way, lead to a sense of uneasiness that the advancement of our science could be overtaken by '...the unthinking application of scientism' (Salkovskis, 2004).

The trend towards grounding practice in the available evidence is not a trend that can be ignored. However, it is a trend that must be adapted and refined if evidence-based practice is going to be sensitive to different populations and contexts for delivery (Mace & Moorey, 2001).

We need as a profession to clarify where counselling psychology can add unique value to the evidence/practice debate by being true to its past and responsive to the future.

2. In considering the impact of scientific evidence on our practice, now and in the future, and how this might relate to the social embeddedness of psychology as a profession, we must acknowledge that science is a marketable product. It has an investment value to commercial sponsors who may have an interest in promoting one interpretation of science over another. We are part of a system of production and consumption of professional services. Our individual objectives have to be considered within organisational contexts for the delivery of services and a systemic framework.

Using a systems framework goes beyond making individual objectives congruent with organisational ones. Specifically, it requires us to look not at the beliefs of individuals but the effects of the system on our client's life chances. The interest is not so much in what individual practitioners say, but how their actions form part of a whole which both enables and discriminates against certain groups and also against those who refuse to conform to the dominant ideology. From a systems perspective self-reflection and personal development is not enough. Engagement with alternative modes of knowledge (including social action and the wider world) needs to form part of our role.

As knowledge becomes increasingly internationalised, new players are offering 'psychology-based' intervention packages in schools, health care, prisons, business and coaching. These commodities psychology and offer supposed guaranteed results with which individual practitioners and established psychology services now compete. This development is seriously impacting the professionals. We are faced with two contradictory trends: rigidity by regulation through state monopoly of credentialing and flexibility in supply, at a time when emerging professions appear to offer similar services to psychologists without the costs of regulation.

For example, why would someone spend several years training to become a counselling psychologist when you can become a life coach after just five days and start offering your services to the public on this basis? The results of psychological research can easily be translated into commercially packaged manuals which bypass the practitioner's traditional role of interpreter of research into practice. As a consequence of operating in a knowledge-driven labour market, we need to be clear where the added value lies from employing a psychologist as opposed to any other professional, including those whose competence derives from life experience and limited training.

3. Where do we add value to our clients? Two areas that might have particular relevance to understanding how a service-based profession might add unique value, derive from research which looks at competitive advantage (Barney, 2001, using the Resource Based View) and the Dynamic Capability View (Teece, Pisana & Shuen, 1997) which has particular value in considering corporate strategy but can also be usefully applied to a profession. Within these frameworks we can be considered as a bundle of resources which represent the potential source of competitive advantage. That advantage is particularly held where the resources we offer are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Bowman & Ambrosini, 2003).

CONCLUSION

Counselling psychology as a discipline and profession serves an important role in the broader discipline of psychology. Many social, political, and economic forces have been placed on the profession and as a result the

profession has had to address its raison d'être (Talley, 1995). It is with great certainty and pride that the conclusion is that counselling psychology has a strong and necessary role as well as a specific and unique identity. As a profession it has a methodology, a body of knowledge, and contributes in very specific ways to the understanding of human behavior. The basic tenets, values, and identity of counselling psychology provide a focus and orientation that is much needed to counter the obsessive focus on what is wrong with individuals that more medically oriented approaches provide. Counselling psychology instead questions what is right with the individual and problematic with the environment. It asks what kind of intervention is necessary for the person-environment interaction to be more productive and satisfying? It is this focus on strengths and wellness that gives counselling psychology an edge in understanding the social and political issues that individuals and society are struggling to address.

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