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# Counselling in the Indian context

## Problems encountered in application of Western (especially non-directive) models of counselling

*topics:*
- *cultural limitations of "non-directive" counselling*
- *person and self in Hindu religious setting*
- *the individual within the joint family*
- *relationship between counsellee and counsellor in Indian setting*

*source: Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling Nr. 1, 1996; pp. 26 – 27*

### Person and Self in the Hindu religious setting

The basic conflict in the application of Rogerian non-directive counselling in the Indian religious setting is in the way the person is understood. Carl Rogers' view is that the person is capable of attaining self realisation, reason is the final arbiter, humankind is the peak in the evolutionary process and he does not discuss the reality or relevance of the supernatural[1]. This "reductionist view", Vahia argues, is limited and totally different from the wholistic view of the person taught in Hinduism[2]. Hindus believe that no person is merely a biological product, but has had longer history than biological science[3]. According to the Upanishads (the sacred scriptures of Hinduism) a person has three important aspects:

a) the inconsistent matter of which the body is made; b) the mental being; and c) the real person, "the pure self-existent conscious being", the *atman*.

The *atman*, which is part of the *paramatman* is encased in the body. It gives inspiration to the human mind towards encasing and identify with the original self [4]. Hindus see their original self in the universal self, a fundamental oneness and supreme consciousness of which the individual is but a tiny spark. Self is understood

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[1] Hurding, *Pastoral Counseling*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953, p.108.
[2] Cf. Vahia/Doongaji/Jeste, "Value of Patanjaii's concepts in the treatment of Psychoneurosis" in: S.Aheti and G.Chrzanowski, *New Dimensions in Psychiatry. a world view*, London: John Wiley and Sons, 1975, pp.294-297, 302f.
[3] P.Sankaranarayanan, "Human Person, Society and State: The Classical Hindu approach". in P.D.Devanandan and M.M.Thomas (eds.) *Human Person, Society and State. A Collection of Essays*, Bangalore: CLS, 1975, p.61.
[4] "The Conception of Man in Indian Thought", *Religion and Society* Vol. X No. 3, September 1963, pp. 11-16.

as an emergent aspect of the world process and not as substance different in kind from the process itself[5]. Radhakrishnan argued that it should be identified neither with a series of mental states nor an unchanging essence[6]. A person is not a separate individual possessing qualities and relating to the environment externally but the elements are all interrelated. A human being is not an absolute individual. The individual and the world co-exist and subsist together, society and environment belong to the same nature[7]. Human progress is understood as increasing awareness of the universal self, seeking harmony between the self and environment building a world of unity and harmony[8]. The distinctive capacity of the person is to identify the self with the whole in co-operative enterprise. The objective pursuit is to reach the super conscious with a strong belief in the individual capacity for attaining spiritual realisation. The superconscious stage is described as the self becoming as wide as the world itself, recognising that one spirit is present in all minds and bodies[9]. The aim is thus to attain a corporate identity and not the individualism of the Rogerian non-directive approach.

Of course, the human person is understood as having individuality and personality. Individuality, called *jivatman*, is the product of ego sense according to which one distinguishes one's self and interests from that of others'[10]. But true self, the *atman* encased in the body, is not to be confused with ego or human self. What a Western person regards as strength, firmness and consistency in an individual, is seen in India as a limitation and separation from the universal self[11]. Hindus argue that individual development enhances the awareness of ego, *ahamkar*, pride in one's own achievements which leads one to cling to the world, which is *maya*, illusion.

### The individual within the joint family

There are also in India other religious groups - Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Zoroastrian and others - each with their own specific views of the person and society. It is difficult to make generalisations for counselling that are applicable to all of them. Nevertheless there is a common Indian culture and a social pattern which becomes clear when studying the organisation of the joint family[12]. Though the delegation of work, and obligations vary from family to family according to the level of exposure to Westernization and modernisation, the power of the joint family provides a strong framework with the elders being responsible for decisions, exerting power and influence. The same pattern becomes a determining factor for social, political and economic life. For example, relationships are not lim-

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[5] *Ibid.*, p.18. R.C.Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gita with a Commentary based on the original sources*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969, pp.21f, 10f.

[6] S Radhakrishnan, *Introduction to the Gita*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960, p.107; S.C.Thakur, *Christian and Hindu Ethics - Two World Religions Compared*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969, pp.88f.

[7] "The Conception of Man in Indian Thought", *op.cit.*, p.18.

[8] S.C.Thakur, *op.cit.*, pp. 88f; See Swami Ahilananda, *Mental Health and Hindu Psychology*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951, pp. 12, 14-16.

[9] P.Shankaranarayanan, *op.cit.*, p.63, Zaehner, op.cit., pp.11f, Swami Ahilananda, op.cit., pp.18f.

[10] P.Shankaranarayanan, *op.cit.*, p.62.

[11] *Ibid.* p.63

[12] Erna Hoch, *Hypocrite or Heretic*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1983, p.106.

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ited to blood ties but extended to the whole caste[13]. Generally, Indians identify themselves in relation to their family, caste, place or position. One's name signifies one's identity. Unlike westerners Indians write their village, family or caste name first. This implies that the individual exists for the group or family. Insistence on one's rights disrupts the social solidarity, security and belonging. Though the 'power' exerted by the joint family can be a hindrance to growth, it remains the source where Indians find their identity. Kinship bonds give individual members a sense of belonging by constituting a network of interdependence and mutual support. The self is to be understood within this setting.

Therefore, Ego or Self for Indians is determined in relation to others in a given situation. Two consequences of this development of flexible self or ego[14] are that the ego adapts itself to the nature of human relationships or situations and systems, develops with duties, traditions, customs or patterns of being which help an individual to feel secure and stable about one's ego-field as long as he/she conforms to the patterns. A person has been taught from childhood that relationships between members of a family are determined by their assigned roles, such as brother, sister, uncle and aunt. This extends to the *jati* (i.e. the extended family or caste). Each one joining the family falls into assigned roles which carry mutual life long obligations[15] seen especially operative during family celebrations and crisis situations. Such obligations carry both good and bad effects. One learns to adjust to a given space and to perform one's duty. The flexible ego is more willing to adjust than to assert. The desire for independence and assertion of one's rights conflicts with one's understanding of self within such a cultural matrix. To take a course of action different from parental expectations is considered as creating disharmony and a disobedience that causes guilt.

## Self-evaluation and accountability

The effectiveness of the non-directive counselling depends on the motivation to get help and the ability for self evaluation and criticism.

a) In the Indian context the strong motivation is to get help from the elders (relatives, friends, neighbours and religious workers) and family members. If one seeks help outside the family it is to discuss economic problems, seek information about study and job opportunities and not personal issues.

b) Non-directive counselling assumes that as genuine insight is gained, self acceptance will be enhanced and the person will deal with life situations more realistically and constructively. Gaining insights depends not only on the availability of a non-directive counsellor but equally on one's capacity for self-perception, self awareness and self criticism. Some Indians lack self criticism. Erna Hoch argues that the prolonged period of dependency in childhood prevents the development

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[13] S.S.Jayaram, "Adaptation of Western Techniques to Mental Health in India", in: *Religion and Society* op.cit., p.69. Cf. P.D.Devanandan and M.M.Thomas, *Christian Participation in Nation Building*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1962, p.37.

[14] K.V.Rajan, "Man, Society and Nation: A Psycho-analyst's View" in *Human Person, society and State*, op.cit., p.48; Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World - A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*, New Delhi: OUP, 1979, pp.111f; Cf. Japanese Understanding of Self in Akihisa Kondo's "Morita Therapy: Its Socio-Historical Context" in S.Arieti and G.Chrzanowski, *New Dimensions in Psychiatry: A World View*, op.cit., pp.242-245.

[15] Sudhir Kakar, *op.cit.*, p.112.

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of strong ego boundaries[16]. Illiterates and semi-literates in a rural setting are not used to introspection or self reflection. Even if they do have a capacity for self-awareness, self-reflection is low. Spratt in his study of Indian personality uses a Freudian frame work and concludes Indian personality is narcissistic. One of the reasons he gives is a negative oedipus complex in the son father relationship which leads to submission rather than the aggression found in occidentals. This inhibits one from exercising a spirit of enquiry but promotes submission to authority[17]. K.V. Rajan indicates that the social hierarchy built on respect and obedience to elders prevents one from showing any disagreement since disagreement, however polite, causes anxiety to those in authority. This perpetuates a vicious circle where those under authority do not disagree with their superiors, but opt for their approval instead. Independent thinking and creative action are inhibited[18]. Indian education system tends to be based on rote learning and fails to enhance critical thinking and a spirit of enquiry. The reason for the lack of self-perception is the way Indians understand the totality of life. In the joint family clear boundaries are set in terms of obligations and expectations. When tensions occur child learns to accept and relate to all the members of the extended family. The child reacts in a manner which totally reflects the family member's expectations. K.V. Rajan notes a person raised in such an environment lacks the ability to look at life in its totality and attests that this split existence deprives people of the ability for self-criticism. They develop the capacity to accommodate contradictions, allowing science and superstitions to co-exist[19].

c) Decision making: To take a decision 'right now' is not the way many Indians operate. Depending on the problem, people consult the astrologers, Indian calendar and time. This varies in families depending on their education, exposure to westernisation and the influence of modernisation on them. Though some take a decision, but such decision is changed at home depending on the locus of control at home.

## The relationship between counsellee and counsellor

a) *Relationship*: The counsellor is a catalyst and not an advisor and in non-directive counselling, counsellor and counsellee relate as equals and such a relationship is devoid of parent-child, physician-patient or priest-parishioner model which implies deep affection, authoritative advice, submissive acceptance and following the leader. This is contrary to the Indian understanding of the *Guru-shishya* relationship. From childhood one is taught to respect teachers next to parents, elders and God. The *guru-shishya* relationship predominates in Indian family thinking and forms the basis of relationships in institutions and offices. Elders are respected and never addressed by first name. Counsellees find it hard to relate to the counsellor as an equal.

Non-directive counselling proceeds with the expectation that the counsellor will be the enabler and the client (counsellee) will be responsible for decisions. There is no conflict between these two expectations. In the Indian context based on the *guru - shishya* model, the expectation is that the teacher leads and the learner is

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[16] Hoch, *Hypocrite or Heretic*, op.cit., p.107.
[17] *Ibid.* pp.83-86 and chapter 8.
[18] Devanandan and Thomas, *Christian Participation*, op.cit., pp.144, 173; Rajan, op.cit., p.46.
[19] *Ibid.*, pp.48f.

led - a counsellee comes with that expectation. The *guru* or elder is not anxious about the *shishya's* dependence on him. *Guru* continues to reinforce such dependence.

b) *Acceptance*: A sub-ordinate in India may not stand or sit in front of his / her superior as a sign of respect. The same is seen in counselling situation. Acceptance is to be understood in a different manner from the Rogerian view.

Acceptance is seen in relation to rapport and eye contact. In Indian culture, similar to African culture, a person being in the same room in close proximity is enough to indicate attentiveness. There is very little eye contact. Direct gaze is considered hostile by the Indians and is mostly used in disciplining. Like the Japanese the Indians also avoid eye contact as a sign of respect.

c) In non-directive counselling the relationship is limited to the *periods of therapy* and exists only within the counsellor's office. Even if it continues it takes a different form. In the Indian context the relationship is on going and not compartmentalized into 'professional' and social.