

BOOK REVIEWS

Person-centered Communication

A. S. du Toit, H. D. Grobler, & C. J. Schenck
Southern Africa: International Thomson Publishing (1998).
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The road to hell is paved with good intentions, especially when people in the helping professions arrive from outside to assist a community. The authors assert that when community improvements are planned, well-meaning outsiders often make the decisions for too many South Africans. Even when helpers call their Reconstruction and Development programs "people centered," local residents are not usually at the center of important decisions at all. "We often find that agencies plan projects according to their frames of reference, only to find that the projects cannot get off the ground as the people are not interested in what they offer."

Different times call for a different approach. du Toit, Grobler, and Schenck believe that a person-centered method is a better way to work with a community. They repeatedly demonstrate corresponding ways of working with individuals and with groups.

The authors train students in community development using a person-centered approach to thinking as the basis. The book is aimed toward beginning students who are new to the Person-Centered Approach.

Respect For Capabilities, Culture, Beliefs

Following a quote from Rogers which emphasizes that clients can do what they need to do once provided with the right conditions, the writers exhibit a consistent allegiance to the effectiveness of respecting individuals and their full capacities. They exemplify by, after describing an occasion where the value system of a community of Buddhists was ignored, with the incident emphasizing "the importance of a participatory way of working where the people in the community lead the way so that their perceptions, needs, self, values, meanings, feelings, experiences and behaviour are validated and respected."

Examples

Almost 100 brief examples are used to bring theory to life, each engaging and easy to read. Many demonstrate well-meaning attempts of helpers which have fallen short. Others are success stories, examples of individuals, groups, and communities succeeding because person-centered helpers have brought ethical attitudes with them and operate with integrity when they move among the people to be helped.

This text has a South African context, but can be used in other settings as well. Many examples refer specifically to places and people, customs, and belief systems found in South Africa. The effect is somewhat like hearing somebody speak in a familiar language but with a pleasant and distinct foreign accent. Reading *Person-centred Communication* provides a

flavor of South Africa to those who do not live there. Being unaware of the intricacies of that country will not impede the understanding of the material which is covered.

Nineteen Propositions

In 1951 Carl Rogers concluded *Client Centered Therapy* with a chapter built around 19 propositions. He wrote: "This chapter attempts to report the present stage of our thinking in this matter of constructing a more generalized statement of personality dynamics and behavior." And then he added, with his famous tentativeness: "Some of these propositions must be regarded as assumptions, while the majority may be regarded as hypotheses subject to proof or disproof."

A listing of all of the propositions is too long to be included here, but since they are featured prominently in the current book, here is one example. Proposition seventeen states: "Under certain conditions, involving primarily complete absence of any threat to the self-structure, experiences which are inconsistent with it may be perceived, and examined, and the structure of self revised to assimilate and include such experiences."

Almost 50 years later the nineteen propositions maintain their relevance. du Toit, Grobler, and Schenck introduce and explain each of the propositions, and then demonstrate them in three different contexts: with individuals, groups, and communities. Some of the tentativeness seems to have been lost in the transcription, but perhaps it is difficult to present material to a student without first believing in it.

Cartoons

The difficulty in illustrating anything that deals with psychology can be seen in any number of texts which are illustrated primarily with photographs of pioneer theoreticians and pictures of vases and faces. For a visual of Rogers, look elsewhere; there are no photographs here. The vase with the faces appears though, and you will also find a score of cartoon illustrations, some silly, most only loosely connected to the particular idea which they attempt to illuminate. But the cartoons are disarming, and if they reduce the level of tension in the student-reader then they have served a purpose. Schenck says that the simplicity of the writing and its friendliness towards students has resulted in interest on the part of some person-centered educators in Japan.

Summary:

We need more than good intentions to pave the road we want to travel as helpers or facilitators, whether in Africa or around the world. An appreciation of the capacities of those whom we seek to help might be one place to start. And if that appreciation for capacities is grounded in a solid theoretical base, with references to the propositions which underpin the person-centered approach, a solid foundation in the approach can be achieved.

These are challenging times in Africa, filled with opportunity as well as challenge. There, as elsewhere, *Person-Centered Communication* can be put to good use.

Reviewed by:

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