

SUBJECTIVITY AND PROFESSIONAL VOCATIONAL COUNSELLING

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Abstract

In this work, I shall deal with the psychodynamic approach to subjectivity in P.V.C. To this effect, I want to develop the concept of subject and subjectivity, its variation and historical-social construction and its approach in counselling, from a psychodynamic conceptual framework in P.V.C. with a short reference to the theoretical sources on which this approach is founded.

Key words: subjectivity; guidance; psychodynamic; historical; social.

1. Introduction

In P.V.C., it is the subject who seeks a counselling intervention. He wants it to be able to enquire about himself/herself and to broaden the information he/she has about education and labour alternatives, so as to make advances in the construction of his life project.

A few decades ago, when clinical strategies in P.V.O. were initiated in Argentina, the main and almost exclusive demand was from adolescents from 16 to 18 years of age, who were close to finishing high school. Counselling work was also performed on students who were finishing primary school (most of them between 11 and 13 y.o.) in schools in the Province of Buenos Aires, in which there was a position of "Educational Assistant" to fulfil this task - amongst other activities - related to educational counselling.

Many years later, and in tune with cultural tremors associated with post-modernism and macro-economical and labour transformations, in the early 90's, consulting by university students who demand professional vocational re-orientation, employees who want to decide on higher education alternatives, and even more recently, unemployed people or people who are dissatisfied with their jobs, who are in their 40's and who demand counselling for re-thinking and developing their work career.

Some days ago, a 38 y.o. woman who was looking for counselling, told me something that was very meaningful at the start of the session: "I want to find out what the purpose of my life is".

It is not, then, only to find a career, employment, a labour initiative. It is to find himself/herself, to open new dimensions of reflection about oneself, the sense of what is lived, the sense of what is to come. And to do it from the centre of their being and their living, from that which we call subjectivity, as a centre of enunciation, of self-awareness, as a space for alternatives, and for project construction and realization.

The subject is able to have intentionality and narrative although continuously he may keep opacities, unknown aspects of himself/herself, his/her affections, motives, potentialities, and future.

2. Some considerations about subjectivity

Subjectivity is constructed and conditioned on foundations that predate the subject. Under these conditions which are preconditions to all subjectivity and, at the same time trans-subjective, more specifically subjective variables interplay that configure them in two senses:

- An un-historical structural sense
 - Unconscious structures.
 - Cognitive structures (intelligence, thought)

- A genetic or historical sense:
 - The opportunities and educational, cultural and economical personal backgrounds.
 - The diversities of subjectivity (gender, ethnic group, aptitudes and special needs, etc).
 - The complementary series (according to Freud) in the biographical walk.
 - The processes of identification and de-identification with other meaningful.
 - The representations of the self, in particular in educational and working roles.
 - The social representations incorporated by the subject.
 - The inter-subjective relationships (affections, emotional implications).
 - Personal disposition to face, elaborate and solve difficulties and adversities (resilience).
 - Personal ideals and values.
 - Building of an identity as a space-time and social continuity in a permanent process of de-construction and reconstruction on the basis of evolutionary change and the transitions of life.

To Gergen, in post-modern culture, the concepts of the "I" and of identity are de-constructed.. Post-modernism has questioned the concept of personal essence itself, that of I and identity. Opposing the cohesive conception, which is in a way uniform, of the I and identity, characteristic of modernism, nowadays, according to this author, what he calls multiphrenia prevails, multiple antagonistic possibilities incorporated to the mind of each subject, that "colonize the I" with an increase of doubts about himself/herself and a larger degree of irrationality. There is a sharp contrast between looking for a nucleus internal to a human being ('the subject') and the multiplicity of the contemporary I, colonized by continuous heterogeneous cultural messages.

This opposes modern definitions of subject and identity that, based on cartesian thought, proposed a subject who was eminently rational, with prevalence of the bare I. Rationalism did not recognise in the subject anything that was not connected to reason and conscience underestimated affections, the body and sexuality, as well as relational, spiritual and metaphysical questions. On the other hand, it tried to homogenize the interminable human variability, resisting the incorporation of diversity as systematic reflection.

Can we still speak today of “subjectivity”?

If so, what would “the subject” be?

Subject is he who is subjected to ties, who is exposed, vulnerable, limited, subjected to the real physical world, to pain and death, and at the same time, the site of representations, user and origin of them, builder of ideas, projects, and agent of the same, though himself /herself shaped by society, by the modelling of social representations, the family, school, and labour production processes.

The subject is capable of self-reference, of reflection, he/she may experience a splitting of himself/herself, as in dreams, in artistic and literary works, in beliefs and values that transcend him/her.

The subject can grow in an autonomous way, the human being can construct his/her own self in the course of his/her life; for this two conditions must be met to be in a way free from coercion (freedom of thought, free to project, speak, do) and becoming aware of oneself and of reality, to know the different options that can be chosen.

Contemporary subjects are being questioned, since the turn of the XIX century, following Freud’s theory of the unconscious and its laws. This moves off-centre the subject’s modern “place” as bare rationality, to hear what other sayings and human truths are transmitted by the ‘other’ psychic scene, the unconscious.

The subject, conceived as a unitary conscience, rationality, enters into a crisis, his/her lack of self-awareness becomes apparent, his/her unwholeness, his/her impotence to provide an account of his/her actions and his/her deep psychic dynamics, his/her being pierced by what is alien and the unknowns expressed in it. The subject comes off centre, is split, fragmented; in his/her supposed congruence there is only an illusion of unity. He/she can not recognise himself/herself in harmony and equilibrium, but in the dispersion, the breaking-up, in the irruption of the unexpected, the irrational, that which is symptomatic.

As a sign of post-modern times, in the idea of subjectivity itself we find incertitude, unstableness and risk.

Then, who do we call ‘the subject’? The question of the subject regarding counselling pops up: “Who chooses vocationally, who elaborates projects, who works to put them into practice, who is ‘the agent’ of one’s own life, one’s tasks and loves, who commits himself/herself to worthy goals?”

I consider that the subject has not disappeared, but that we are witnessing the advent of new way for subjectivity to construct and manifest itself.

The socio-cultural and historical context creates other conditions for subjectivity to turn up, thus opening up new ways of "being human".

The changing, vertiginous options, this ever more technological world, planned and at the same time ungovernable, with advances and misery in never-heard-of dimensions, social reality which is conflicting and the gorgeous hyper-reality simulated in audiovisual media, build up a maze in the middle of which human beings circulate, showing frequent bouts of confusion and blockage that drag on or re-appear in different guises throughout the life cycle, as regards work expectations and to uphold desires and decisions with a certain degree of satisfaction.

This introduces additional conflicts into our personal projects, both educational and occupational, as it complicates training and knowledge recycling, in an occupational world which has seen a drastic fall in labour offer and overabundance of high-qualifications labour offer.

We encounter a subject that has been constructed in a historical moment, a socio-cultural and economic grid, a scientific interpretation.

Psychoanalysis and other contemporary discourses construct the subject_= they offer theoretical constructs of him/her.

This subject is somehow simultaneously (de)-constructed, he is questioned as a subject, questioned as a historical and social mode of being a subject.

The question of self-knowledge "Who am I?", a moving factor to start looking for counselling referred to projects that can be carried out in the future, multiplies its relational dimensions: who am I to other people?; who do they say I am?; who do they want me to be? And this expands into the dimensions of looking for help: who can help me in my search and my choice; how do I find this help, what must I do to recognise, construct and carry out my projects?

Foucault states that self-knowledge is one way of looking after oneself. Both aspects should be, according to this author, essential to develop an ethical conduct. This may take place if thought turns round to address itself, to be able to grasp its own process and become self-conscious, as well as making it possible to be responsible for oneself, to change and transform oneself in agreement with one's own projects. This implies a way of behaving towards oneself, by means of different resources: memorizing the past, self-examination, verification of representations as they turn up in the mind.

According to Foucault, this self-transformation process constitutes a true ascesis to transform one's own existence, "the price to be paid to access the truth", as in order to

reach the truth, it is necessary to transform oneself in something different; perhaps we should say, to construct somehow a new identity.

A question he poses in his work *Hermeneutics of the subject* seems to me especially worded for counsellors: "what transformations are necessary within the subject's own self so as to have access to truth?". To have access to truth, to know oneself in depth and to transform himself/herself, the human being requires the presence of someone else that bears him company, that plays the role of mentor, of a valid interlocutor to tread this labyrinthine path. This is the role which we, as counsellors, may find ourselves in, in the socratic way of truth's midwives in the face of the subject's subjectivity, in order to achieve the birth and development of the project that has been elaborated by the subject. In order to construct himself as a subject, to transform ignorance and lack of knowledge about one's self into knowledge, liberation and self-dominion the presence and intervention of someone else is needed. The relationship that there exists with one's self is enriched by this relation with the other, and this makes it possible to increase self-knowledge and transformation.

We might add another question to Foucault's proposal: How could we help the subject who comes for a consultation carry out these transformations he needs to achieve his goals?

Another important idea in Foucault is to think of subjectivity from the perspective of power, which socially models hierarchies, watches and controls, subjections and limits to individual freedom, based on a socio-cultural production that from the beginning of capitalism created subjectivities that work as producers. In the last decades, and within the framework of post-industrial capitalism, social power creates subjectivities which are predominantly consumists or 'on the edge' subjectivations which behave as marginalized or excluded from the system.

In extreme situations of exclusion, we might think that we incur the risk of *desubjectivation*. Does the subject disappear then? Does the possibility of carrying out a project, of representing oneself in relation to the future, dwindle until it vanishes? What happens when the social actor feels he/she is lost or sees exercise and interpretation of self seriously deteriorated, as a member of his/her society, active participant of management and change possibilities, as a subject with rights, as a human being worthy of consideration and from being and feeling a citizen, he turns to be, as in past centuries, a vassal or a servant deprived of his/her own rights?

This turns vocational choice of a job into a complex and random activity; the search for a job and training to carry it out, introduces the need for continued formation, re-questioning oneself about the insertion achieved or the dramatic search for insertion or re-insertion when facing unemployment or underemployment problems.

Here we delve into another question regarding power: social, economic, educational, labour, health and human rights policies,

As counsellors, even if we can not solve them in an immediate and direct way, we can, on the other hand, warn about the risks we run in societies with high turbulence, great incertitude both social and economical, with a state which is absent in vital roles such as education, work, health, equality of opportunity, juridical order, transparency in `public affairs, security.

In this framework, counselling intends to de-alienate the subject, help him/her to become aware of his/herself as an actor, to increase his/her autonomy margins, to commit himself/herself to projects of change.

The psychodynamic conceptual frame in P.V.C. gets its main contributions from psychoanalytic theory and social psychology; along with their corresponding developments:

This school of thought has made valuable strategic and technical contributions, and is characterized by a mainly qualitative approach, based on individual or group interviews in which listening and a comprehensive and interpreting modality with instrumentation of diverse techniques with a projective function, to foster the client's role as protagonist and, through the counsellor's interventions, to facilitate a deeper self-knowledge and knowledge of the vocational/educational/labour reality, promoting in the client the elaboration of a personal project with social insertion.

As to the counselling practice, in the present time, it is open to incertitude, it admits subjective and contextual ambiguity, broadens its perspectives and includes aspects that were earlier considered as an instance of dichotomy.

In this presentation, I shall make an unavoidable cutting out regarding the subject-matter and the authors that I mention, as I shall place myself within my own theoretical standpoint and within its strategic and technical implications. I acknowledge my debt both to Rodolfo Bohoslavsky and to Angela López Bonelli as authors from my own country.

The theoretical psychodynamic framework in P.V.C. is now known as *clinical strategy*, thanks to the first Argentinian systematization in the field, carried out by Rodolfo Bohoslavsky in 1971, who shortly afterwards moved to Brazil, where his contributions are still valued.

This author theorized on clinical strategy and its characteristics, which he set out from the one he called actuarial strategy (perhaps we might call the latter psychotechnical or psychometric strategy).

Bohoslavsky considered mainly adolescents who, according to clinical strategy, can reach a decision if they elaborate on the conflicts they face regarding their future. He stresses the active role played by the client, the counsellor's task being to make things clear and to

inform. Aptitudes are not specific. He also stresses the relationship the client develops with his/her study and profession. By then (1971), he had already stated that the socio-cultural reality changes continuously, thus making it important to know the socio-cultural and professional situation and to anticipate future change.

Angela López Bonelli published her book *Vocational counselling as a process* in 1989. In her view, counselling constitutes a process centred on the clarification of vocational identity, which is attained by means of a clinical strategy. She develops the idea of choice of vocational identity as a process which is simultaneously conscious and unconscious, linked to the concept of the self and to the integration of the self in occupational roles. She proposes as main technique the interview, as well as diverse auxiliary resources. She refers to counselling within different institutional environments, in group form, and contributes an individual casuistry.

In 1986 I published my first book on V.C., entitled *Vocational Counselling, Clinical and Educational Contributions*, furthering clinical strategy, with contributions on *vocational choice learning*, which takes place after a long run which begins with early family and personal experiences, applying clinical strategy to other situations, such as working with adults with special needs or the insertion of counsellors within systematic educational settings, together with development of group counselling plans.

More recently, other books of my authorship follow: *Discover the way. New educational and clinical contributions to V.C.* (first edition in 1994) in which varied auxiliary resources are systematized to carry out counselling individually, to groups or in workshop form, and presents new developments in clinical V.C., dealing with subjects such as personal and vocational identity, characterization of contemporary adolescents, and counsellor training.

In 1998, with *Counselling for a transforming world. Young men deciding between education and work*, I gave a diagnosis of our present society, to help comprehension of new forms of subjectivity that take place in an environment of socio-cultural and economic transformation, in a research paper based on 80 cases of professional V.C. on individuals, where I characterize the clinical approach (psychodynamic) and where I present a typology of the studied casuistry.

The clinical method or strategy has, in my opinion, the following characteristics:

- It promotes active commitment from clients in order to achieve a broadening of self-knowledge and of occupational reality, with a view to elaborate a personal vocational and labour project.
- it can be applied to individuals, groups, institutions and in different stages of life.
- it is a focused intervention for a limited amount of time.

- the importance of having updated information on the educational and labour world is stressed, based on representations brought by those seeking advice and the exploration of occupational reality.
- the counsellor's role is that of companion; he favours reflection, sheds light on problems and promotes search and information processing by clients.
- counsellor's interventions are operative: they are focused on the explicit task (learning to choose and to enter the labour market) and on the underlying psychic dynamics (conflicts, anxieties, and unknown capacities).
- the main technique is the individual or group operative interview; in educational institutions, workshop techniques can be proposed and good results can be achieved, as an introductory approach.
- auxiliary techniques are used as mediating instruments for self-knowledge to get information about the labour reality: projective – psycho-dynamic – directed dream – play – multimedia – informative – computerized.

3. Typology proposed based on the studied casuistry:

- a. V.C. with a condition of diffuse and confusing anxiety before the obligation of having to choose finishing high school, which is a frequent subject in V.C. requests by adolescents as well as by their parents.
- b. V.C- with family expectations of academic success and labour insertion, in conflict with “post-modern” psycho-evolutionary moratorium: consultation requested initially by parents and accepted by teenagers.
- c. V.C. or V.R.O. (vocational re-orientation) with conflict between “non-conventional” vocational inclinations and family directives and expectations: clients and their parents are very interested in having a session, as they are afraid to make the wrong choice or of not being able to enter the labour market if they follow their vocational preferences.
- d. Vocational Re-orientation (V.R.O.) after unresolved bereavements due to the death of a family member, frequent movings, migrations or important losses.
- e. V.R.O. before labour-academic problems with deep unresolved conflicts: narcissistic personality traits, conflicts in personal and family history and/or neurotic disorders.
- f. Counselling or Re-orientation for the development of a work career in the face of working transitions, underemployment or unemployment situations, in young men and adults.

4. Final Conclusions:

And finally: Jean Guichard holds that in the twentieth century, the goals of counselling diverge, there being a strong cleavage between two conceptions of counselling: social and individual.

He states that according to the social conception, the goal is to build a just society, in which everyone could develop fully his/her potentialities, fostering at the same time social solidarity.

The individual conception, on the other hand, holds that counselling is focused exclusively on the individual, as the actor who is entrepreneur of his/her own life, within a liberal economic context.

In my view, if it were not possible to recognize and interrelate what is social to what is subjective, we would run the risk of dichotomize counselling intervention. I consider that we can not speak of subject or subjectivity if we do not think of these ideas in an interdisciplinary way, from pre-subjective and trans-subjective conditions that constitute the subjects, where we examine and always keep in mind the social context that produced them, and at the same time, the possibility of reflecting on the self and the construction and follow-up of projects which characterize human beings, in a constantly unfolding future, open to risk and change.

The construction of personal projects can not be achieved if we do not address social aspects, the insertion in common projects, the web of interpersonal, social, cultural, political, economical, historical and ecological relationships, that constitute the existence of a subject, in solidarity with his/her fellow men.

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