Public debate at the Barbican Theatre, London, chaired by Marina Warner. "The psychologisation of society"

Richard Hallam, 5/11/04

Bobby Baker's show How to Live gives us much food for thought but I want to focus down on the question of using Psychology to develop techniques for changing behaviour. I want to talk about that because this is what in fact I have been doing throughout my career. I have worked as a therapist in the NHS for over 30 years and over this period I've seen considerable advances in the purely technical aspects of therapy. We are now in a much better position to help people change their behaviour if that's what they want to do. I would equate this with advances in hip replacement or cataract operations. Of course there are all kinds of caveats and conditions to place on this claim, which I will elaborate later. I will also try in this brief talk try to answer critics of psychological therapy who have got into a moral panic about it – I don't believe their fears are really justified.

In the show itself, Bobby Baker teaches a set of skills for dealing with common everyday problems, for instance, expressing your feelings, overcoming irrational fears, and communicating effectively. All her techniques are based, very loosely, on principles derived from psychological theory. Of course, as a self-styled Guru she represents the get-rich-quick variety of lifestyle expert. In this persona, she represents Therapy Culture. Psychological advice can now be found everywhere – in the advice columns of newspapers, in self-help books on every conceivable problem, in radio phone-ins, in TV programmes that attempt makeovers on badly-dressed, socially inept people and turn them into so-called successes. Therapy culture continues a long tradition of people who make money out of people's distress and promise them the earth. Of course, these so-called experts disappear down the road long before their new wonder treatment has failed to work. I want to emphasise that these examples of therapy culture are not psychological therapy carried out on the basis of a contract with a client with due regard for the ethics of the enterprise and by professionals who can be held accountable for the outcome.

My impression from reading various critiques of psychotherapy is that they lump together therapy, as practiced by accountable professionals, and various expressions of therapy culture. Looked at sociologically, they are of course closely related. Bobby Baker's eleven skills are taken from therapy literature. In the last 50 years or so, society has become more psychologically aware and this trend has gone hand in hand with a view of ourselves as autonomous – selves who design their own lives – in fact are obliged to do so. As autonomous selves we seem to have an enormous appetite for advice on how to live. Nikolas Rose will, I'm sure, be talking about this. I've already made the distinction between orthodox therapy and therapy culture but I certainly don't want to suggest that all of the former is a good thing and all therapy culture is bad – but they should at least be distinguished.

The position I want to put forward is that it can be useful to take a rational view of the problems that face you and if necessary use psychological techniques to help you to solve them. It's not the only strategy, of course, and would only ever constitute an aspect of any therapy. Let me begin by reviewing how we commonly deal with life's adversities.

Power Point 1   Coping with Life's adversities

1. Bear it (while attempting to grin). *Well, many of us end up doing that.*
2. Imagine it's not happening. *Unfortunately this one catches up with you in the end.*
3. Drink and drugs and………   *We are doing that too – 1 in 40 of us are on antidepressants. The other 39 are probably getting high in other ways.*
4. Blame yourself or blame others. *This is a cheap solution but your friends tend to get tired of it.*
5. Find a shoulder to lean on. *This is what many people think therapy is about although I've never met a therapist who wanted their shoulder lent on, unless their patient was attending three times a week and paying a fat fee.*
6. Pray. *I guess fewer people are doing this today.*
7. Gain insight into the original cause (whatever it was that happened in the woodshed). *This is fine as far as it goes - but it doesn't go very far. You might be wiser but just as unhappy.*
And finally:
8. Analyse the problem, consider the options, implement a solution. If necessary, find an expert to help you to do so. *If Bobby Baker is not available, go to your GP and ask to be referred on.*

Is this a good strategy? Can you really use techniques to make life adjustments and set yourself back on course? I believe you can but, as I said, this is only ever one component of therapy.

This problem-solving approach is clearly related to scientific thinking.   You treat yourself as a natural phenomenon, trying to explain yourself by natural laws of causation,….. and once you've made your analysis, you engineer a solution. The new problem-solving therapies are very much in love with charts, graphs and diaries. In effect, it can be called a form of self-engineering.

The doubt that creeps in, though, is about the nature of the self that is engineering a new model of itself and whether it has the resources to do so. It seems to be a shaky boot-strapping operation. As a long-standing therapist I ask myself, Am I an agent of the NHS thought police, subtly subjecting people to Government control? Am I imposing my personal values on people? Am I focusing too much on the individual while ignoring their appalling working hours or inadequate housing? Would these people be starting the next social revolution if I wasn't there to ease their distress?   It would take me some time to give an adequate answer to all these questions but, for now, I'll just say that the worrying nature of the possibilities I have just described can be exaggerated.

There is clearly a question to be asked about the goals of therapy, - and in the kind of therapy I practice it is the client who decides this. But how does the client decide what their ideal self should be like?   People's desires and wants are shaped by society at large, including the influence of the media, advertising, government messages and even the writings of therapy gurus. But let me just elaborate on my understanding of the kinds of assumption many of my clients make about life in general.

Powerpoint 2. Modern assumptions

People should be happy most of the time, even when at work.

We should have a rich and fulfilling life and undertake different projects to express our 'identity'.

We shouldn't have to give up on any of our projects but should succeed at all of them.

Powerpoint 3

RESULT - DISAPPOINTMENT!

Disappointment - plus a search for where things went wrong and attempts to fix them, and this involves seeing counselors, therapists, reading self-help books and so forth.   I am not one of those people who say that we shouldn't have such unrealistic expectations about life. Haven't we always reached for the moon and fallen flat on our faces? I'm tempted to say "That's life"

However, some observers have got into a moral panic about the way people are turning to so-called experts for advice. Here is my interpretation of what Frank Furedi is saying in his recent book called Therapy Culture.

Powerpoint 4. Frank Furedi, Therapy Culture, Routledge,   2004.

We've lost faith in our own natural resilience – we've become feeble and fragile.

We've pathologised normal unhappiness into disorders

We have become obsessed with the eliminating the normal risks of life

We should feel more guilt and responsibility for our failures

Even the Police and the Army have gone soft

Therapy is the new "opium of the people"

What are Furedi's own remedies?   It seems they are (and here I'm paraphrasing):

Powerpoint 5

Rely on good old community spirit and stand firm as we did in the Blitz. *(Well there aren't too many Albert Squares left in London and they are not exactly hotbeds of mental health)*

Go back to real politics and grand systems of meaning *(Is anyone going to listen to that after surviving the 20C?)*

Toughen up and become stoical
As regards this last point I think we need to look back at our changing values to realize how wrong this can be.

Powerpoint 6 Some Twentieth century values we have lost

Turning a blind eye to domestic violence because an Englishman's home is his castle

Pretending that child physical and sexual abuse is not happening

Expecting returning soldiers to put the war behind them (wars are normally horrible anyway)

I could go on and give more examples – the point I am making is that we have become justifiably more tender-hearted. I have no objection to stoicism but it's a strategy of last resort. There's no point in being stoical if there's a better way out. People who get caught up in savage wars and survive by being stoical do not, thereby, make themselves immune to its longer-term effects. There is no earthly reason why they should stay stoical at a later point in time, if they wish to find other ways of coming to terms with what has happened to them.

To sum up, I think that the recent turn towards therapy is an expression of greater compassion rather than a weakening of our moral fibre. But if people want to change their behaviour they need a set of effective techniques for doing so. The rationale of therapy is to help the individual function autonomously – to remove impediments to creativity and enjoyment. But, of course, autonomy is a mixed blessing when a person does not have the resources or the imagination to choose wisely. There are clearly many problems in life that should be tackled communally and we may need to look to authorities for moral direction rather than leaving things up to autonomous individuals whose wants and desires can be manipulated. These are questions we seem to be grappling with at the present time, whether the subject is smoking cigarettes in public places, gambling in Las Vegas style casinos, or controlling the food that our children eat at school. I wouldn't want to pretend that there are easy answers.