

DESCRIPTION OF A HYPOTHESISED SITUATION WHERE A PSYCHOLOGIST OF RELIGION COULD BE ASKED TO OFFER A SOLUTION TO A REAL-WORLD PROBLEM

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Abstract

In this paper, it is presented and discussed in a few pages the hypothetical case study of a 'perfectionist clerk'. The perfectionist clerk is an employee who considers himself as being stainless and unblemished not only at work but also in his relationship unto God. This case study is an example of how a psychologist of religion could be able to deal with a client like that in terms of helping him overcoming obsessions related to faulty assumptions regarding oneself. Here, there are discussed possible scenarios as how a psychologist of religion would work with a client like one, and which ways would he be suggesting in undertaking as to therapeutic processes to his client's case. There is also discussed what could be done better, as to that client's case, so that a balance to be brought upon in view to the client's faulty assumptions and cognitions.

Keywords: *Psychologist of religion, cognitive-behavioural therapy, passivity, compliance*

Introduction

The case-subject is the 'perfectionist clerk' and comes from a book written by Schjelderup & Schjelderup (1932). A 24-year-old clerk visited a psychologist of religion reflecting he was longing for perfection. He reported examples such as being the best employee at work would he ever thought of; however, if he was to be ever-mistaken, he would feel worthless; he would experience anxiety, inferiority and non-acceptance from others. At the same time, he believed he was in constant communication with God. Religion was his main concern in life. He did not care about others, but he did care about God's opinion of him.

If anyone was to challenge him he would feel embarrassed. He admitted the aspect of God was an ideal of pureness in every respect. He was proud he did not have love affairs. At the peak of his religious experiences, he recalled he was hearing voices and feeling scared, without been able to sleep at night. He went to the psychologist of religion, because he was afraid he was going to die or be killed by somebody.

• The theoretical concepts that the psychologist of religion could rely on and why should they be relevant to the 'problem'?

The psychologist of religion considered that the case of the 'perfectionist clerk' was related to the approach of cognitive-behavioural therapy. The concepts he thought that match with this understanding was the client's compulsive tendencies and obsessive attitudes. The general theoretical background the psychologist of religion relied upon was the concept of psychosis (Schjelderup & Schjelderup, 1932, p. 36).

The psychologist of religion underlined the concepts of passivity and compliance with rules and standards dominating his client's outgrowth (Schjelderup & Schjelderup, 1932, p. 36). The criterion of perfection and spiritual cleanliness was somehow understood by the psychologist of religion as his client's quest to self-identity. By caring about God's opinion, he was experiencing the twofold conception of pleasure and fear (Schjelderup & Schjelderup, 1932, p. 36). Pleasure over others'

sinfulness and fear of one's punishment, in case the God's commands kept unsatisfied. Pleasure and fear had been proved decisive factors to establishing the client's latter psychosis. They were 'indulged', when his client was discovering his sexual drives. On one hand, he thought of a punishment, if he was to fall into sexual desires; on the other, he was experiencing the fear-inspired suppression of sexual interest as an inhibition towards perceiving others in anxiety (Schjelderup & Schjelderup, 1932, p. 39).

• **What the psychologist of religion has done?**

The psychologist of religion asked questions associated with the client's family background. His family were frequent Churchgoers, the client recalled, and if he did not want to go to Church his father was telling him 'God will not be satisfied by your behaviour' (Wulff, 1997, p. 348). The psychologist of religion explained the 'non-satisfaction of God' as his father's dissatisfaction of not being obeyed. He also asked him to remember how he was feeling about his parents. The client recollected he hated them and had always wished them to die (Schjelderup & Schjelderup, 1932, p. 38). The client was not emotionally satisfied by the way his parents were treating him, feeling subordinated, depressive and fostering inhibitions of pureness and cleanliness, in view to consider others dependant upon himself; dependant upon his perfection and flawlessness (Wulff, 1997, p. 349). His quest for perfection was developed through an idealised image which he headed to God, in order to disguise his failure to communicate with others, the psychologist of religion argued; thereby, experiencing isolation and loneliness (Schjelderup & Schjelderup, 1932, p. 36).

As a result, the 'quality' of this perfection was to create the illusion he was superior, scared not to reveal his inferiority feelings, so not to be scorned by others. His inferiority feelings were filled with guilt and lack of confidence, caused primarily by his parents' behaviour, the psychologist of religion pointed out (Wulff, 1997, p. 348). According to Pruyser (1977, p. 336), the psychologist of religion continued explaining his client that this understanding of himself led to effects of an *autistic distortion fed by an illusionist world*, which was evident as much to his personal inhibitions as to his fantastic images of perfection. That *autistic distortion* made him peculiarly delicate and vulnerable, and that is why he was afraid not to be killed, as well as 'hearing voices', for he was internally seeking to understand the constant nature and great deal of vigilance against intrusions from either his autistic or realistic side (Pruyser, 1983, p. 71).

The psychologist of religion said, the client's 'suffering was unmistakably delusional and paroxysmic, leading his overall psychosis to an impulsive emotionality and compulsively reiterating performance of same thoughts and sayings about himself'. (Pruyser, 1977, p. 336). He asked his client to sympathize himself, i.e. to increase tolerance and self-acceptance, and to consider his quest for perfection as an attempt to discover oneself, in line with his idea of cleanliness, which was mostly related to his inner effort to cut himself off from that parental attachment (Wulff, 1997, p. 349).

• **How the psychologist of religion's input was assessed?**

The discussion between the psychologist of religion and the client about his family background was assessed by Wulff (1997, p. 347) as the psychologist of religion's attempt to investigate the idea of self-motif dominating the client's belief concerning God's opinion. Wulff assessed it, by pointing out that the psychologist of religion looked for the reasons making his client to live in aberration with his psychological conflicts.

O'Flaherty (1984, p. 59) by assessing the psychologist of religion's input, argued that he examined the quest for perfection as an understanding of his client's illusionist world. The psychologist of religion was asking to discover the aspect of the self-referred illusionist ideas that led his client to threats of death, as well as to feeling rejected.

Pruyser (1974, p. 203) claimed that the psychologist of religion by viewing in his client the idea of superiority, in proportion to an image's fixity -that of God- was attempting to conceive his client's dynamic interplay of both his *autistic* and *realistic* worlds. Pruyser (1983, p. 176) contented that the

psychologist of religion by evaluating the client's behaviour as self-contained, he wished to show 'the thoroughgoing realism of the inhibition to the play of imagination which restricted the growth of the client's inner potentials'. According to Pruyser's account (1974, p. 241), the psychologist sought to examine the latent cause of the client's non-participation to an adult world of realism and reality.

Finally, the overall aspect of psychosis, that was stressed by the psychologist of religion, was assessed by Winnicott (2002, p. 72) as generally psychoneurotic, because it was referred to the client's childhood experiences, which led to personal inner conflicts that later developed his search for perfection.

•Some criticisms that could be made against what the psychologist of religion did, or should have done

The psychologist of religion's assessment examines the client's overall state of inner imbalance in reference to psychotic and compulsive manifestations. However, the concept the psychologist of religion needed also to consider, was that of religion. The client maintained he was a very religious person and that religion became an obsession in his life. The aspect of religiosity dominated his client's lifestyle. Religion represented the client's inner feelings of wholeness, though such affects remained piecemeal. His religion was in a primitive stage of expression and experience, thereby exclusively neurotic and immature (Guntrip, 1956, p. 97). Erikson (Gleason, 1975; Linn et al., 1988; Wright, 1982), by stressing his eight stages of development, claims that such kind of psychotic behaviour is related to religion.

Shafranske (1996, p. 570) considers that any psychological assessment should be understood within the normative experience of a given cultural, denominational and local religious environment. From a cognitive-behavioural point of view, the course of assessment should contribute to an understanding of the client's religiosity in terms of degrees of openness versus closedness and rigidity versus flexibility. Openness in association with social encounters; closedness in relation to fears against others; rigidity in terms of depression; and flexibility in view one to be able to accept oneself (Shafranske, 1996, p. 570).

The aspect of religion and its relation to the self, whether as a psychological issue towards inner balance or as a problematic relationship filled with faulty assumptions and cognitions (Stanovich, 2004, p. 3), is to an extent of a cognitive-behavioural weigh, for it refers to life disturbances and how these should be examined in a realm which takes into account the idea of the Absolute (Pargament, 1990; Pargament et al., 2003, p. 1336) together with the understanding of cognitive restructuring and interventions that could associate to behavioural changes and not avoidant experiences.

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Article received: 2014-07-27