

A Profound Behavioral Approach

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It was the distinguished psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan (1892-1949) who focused on the cultural and social factors that influence the development of human behavior. His approach for explaining behavior and personality (the relatively enduring pattern of recurrent interpersonal situations which characterize a human life) represents a fine combination of psychiatry and social psychology. He stressed the study of interpersonal relations or processes of interaction among people to interpret behavior and even more to establish the challenge and the capacity for change. He believed that human behavior can never be studied in isolation since it never exists separate and independent from other human beings.

Every aspect of a human being is a consequence of interpersonal relationships experienced by the person in his or her life, starting from the moment of birth. Patterns of behaviors (personality) are displayed only through a person's interactions with others who may or may not be physically present in images, memories or fantasies. Even the most isolated hermit has a pattern of behavior defined by interactions with images and memories of others. Sullivan's approach to human behavior is a blend of biology and sociology, and of psychiatry and psychology, a perspective that has been found to be effective in the treatment of emotional disturbance, particularly schizophrenia, a condition into which he had great insight.

According to Sullivan ("Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatric"), there are three core observable processes in the interpersonal interactions that define an individual's set of behavioral patterns, and also influence the potential for change: Dynamisms, Personifications and Mode of Experience.

Dynamism is a relatively enduring configuration of energy which manifests itself in characterizing processes in interpersonal relations. This means that any kind of behavior, either physical or mental (as in thinking), that lasts and recurs like a habit or a sustainable behavioral pattern is dynamism. This dynamism results from experiences with other people. They accumulate so that the greater the

amount and variety of experiences a person has, the greater amount of dynamisms he or she exhibits. In a very broad sense, dynamisms are similar to the concept of style of life, in that they are envelopes of behaviors and attitudes that characterize one's interactions with other people. There are a wide variety of dynamisms such as aggressive, lustful, and friendly, to name just a few. Sullivan believed that all dynamisms can be categorized in two classes: 1) the zonal dynamisms that are centered on the physical zones of the body. 2) the interpersonal dynamisms that are learned from experiences with other people.

Both innate and learned dynamisms influence human behavior and interpersonal relations and impact the capacity of people for behavioral modification and change.

The most important dynamism is the self-dynamism or the self system, which is essentially the person's self image, constructed on the basis of his or her interpersonal relationships.

Warning! Since the self dynamism, if functioning properly reduces anxiety between the person and his or her environment, it becomes highly resistant to change. This is because any change (emerging new conditions) may lead to anxiety. Therefore, its consistent maintenance is reinforced. The ideal situation is one in which the true self is aware of the machination of the self dynamisms. If the distance between the true self and the self system is too much, the person may become schizoid (introverted, unsocial).

Personifications refer to the images one has of other people and of the self. They are not necessarily accurate representations, because like all perceptions, they are strongly influenced by the nature of one's self system.

Like dynamisms, personifications begin in infancy and are concerned with the protection from anxiety. By adopting consistent perception of things (class of people!), the person is able to react to them in a consistent manner. Personifications that are believed by large number of people (e.g. all professors are crazy or absentminded) are stereotypes and prejudgments. Categorizing and prejudging are what personifications are all about.

Sullivan wrote about the three different ways of experiencing the world around us referring to three levels of thinking or cognition by which a person relates to others. They are called prototaxic, parataxic, and syntactic experiences.

The earliest and most primitive mode of experience, the prototaxic occurs during the first several months of infancy. It involves simply and directly perceiving sensations, thoughts or feelings immediately as they occur, without drawing any connections between them or interpreting them. As the child grows and develops the ability to organize and draw some meaning from experiences expands and this is the dimension of parataxic. The third and highest mode of experience, the syntaxis, and the child learns to use the language, not just sounds, but symbols (words), the meanings which are generally shared by all people in the culture. In this mode, the child learns logical relationships and is able to test his or her perceptions against those of others.

Dynamisms, personifications and modes of experiences have an impact within the scenarios of organizations. To the extent that these processes are necessary for survival they can become in some ways counter-productive, in that they may represent a system of conforming to the culture (this is the way things get done here!) and, therefore may hide the true potential of the human-institutional system.

Where addressing the challenge of organizational change a key distinction has to be made between the way people ought to behave, the way they can behave, and the way they want to behave.

Understanding this profound psychology can help organizational change agents to cope with the interesting and paradoxical statement of: “You know, I’m all for improvement and progress. It is change I object to.”

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