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Theoretical concepts of evil in counseling

Abstract

Evil can harm an individual in many ways, including psychologically, and, therefore, may be a factor that needs to be addressed in counseling. Many human conditions or problems could be seen as either evil or caused by evil. This is important to children and to people who work for them. This paper is an investigation regarding the origins of evil. Three theoretical approaches based in psychology will be reviewed: Freudian, Behavioral, and Third Force. Implications for school counselors will be briefly treated.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS OF EVIL
IN COUNSELING

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Rationale

Evil can harm an individual in many ways, including psychologically, and, therefore, may be a factor that needs to be addressed in counseling. Many human conditions or problems could be seen as either evil or caused by evil. This is important to children and to people who work for them. This paper is an investigation regarding the origins of evil. Three theoretical approaches based in psychology will be reviewed: Freudian, Behavioral, and Third Force. Implications for school counselors will be briefly treated.

Definitions of Evil

"Evil is not a concrete concept. It is an abstract evaluative one which denotes an undesirable characteristic attributed to either an action or an actor" (Stitt, 1987, p. 26). Evil as defined by Webster (1977) refers to that which is morally bad, wicked, sinful and something that brings trouble or pain.

Stitt (1982) expressed the belief that a deed is evil if it harms another in any of the following five ways:

- (a) an individual is physically harmed (e.g., murder, assault or rape);
- (b) an individual's property is harmed (e.g., theft or vandalism);
- (c) an individual is psychologically harmed (e.g., threat of physical injury, trauma or fright);
- (d) an individual is socially harmed (e.g., exploitation, debasement, slander or libel);
- (e) an individual's freedom is taken away (e.g., invasion of privacy, kidnapping or false imprisonment). (p. 4)

Three Theoretical Approaches to Evil

The theorists considered in this investigation of the origins and presence of evil were chosen because they were believed to have the most relevance for counselors and to be representative of the three theoretical considerations to be discussed. Included are individuals from the three basic forces in psychology: Freudianism, Behaviorism as represented by B. F. Skinner, and the Third Force, which recognized the human organism's inborn aspiration to love, esteem, knowledge, and beauty and includes individuals such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers (Goble, 1971).

Theories regarding the origin of evil came from three distinct camps. The first, with its roots in the Darwinian tradition, linked evil to genetic/anthropological manifestations (Stevenson, 1987). According to this theory the human organism displays behavior on the basis of genetic instructions or according to the historical species specific significance around a behavior.

The second theory regarding the origin of evil, linked the root of evil behavior to societal and cultural influences (Stevenson, 1987). Adherents of this theory believe that behavior becomes a function of environmental variables. For any piece of behavior there is a finite set of environmental conditions (past and present) that create a causal law, i.e., anyone to whom all conditions apply will perform a given behavior.

The third general theory of the origin of evil took on variables of the two previous theories in combination (Stevenson, 1987). Theories in this general category are referred to as Third Force. These Third Force theories postulated that each human organism is comprised of specific psychic pieces. The effects of evil become present when some of the psychic

pieces become out of balance as a result of physiological or environmental conditions. This places certain limitations on the individual and places extreme stress on the way that parts of the psyche operate.

Theorists of the contention that evil is a manifestation of genetic or anthropological roots share the belief that humankind's instinctual drives are a means of explaining evil behavior (Tobin, 1991). The Freudian view of human nature held that people were born as wild animals who needed to be socialized and that without society's controls and limits, they would do evil and destructive, amoral things. "All culture, he [Freud] believed, was created out of libidinal restraint and sublimation" (Karier, 1976, p. 125). Therefore, the presence of evil resulted from the clash between a person's expression of his true instinctual impulse and the restraint placed upon this impulse by society. Konrad Lorenz (Stevenson, 1987) supported Freud's idea that instinctual desires must find some type of acceptable societal outlet or they will manifest themselves in culturally damaging or evil ways.

Lorenz (Stevenson, 1987) emphasized the anthropological roots of humankind's territorial and predatory past. Behavior was explained not by past experience of the individual but by the process of evolution which had given rise to the species of animal. Lorenz isolated behavior as being derived from four major drives: (a) feeding, (b) reproduction, (c) flight, and (d) aggression. Of the four major drives, Lorenz gave some insight as to how aggression could be a significant cause for the presence of evil. He put a great stake in our eventual understanding of evil. "The hope of the future is to reduce our aggressive drives to a tolerable level without disturbing its essential function" (p. 114). Lorenz was of the belief that a greater understanding of humankind's past and the incorporation of societal outlets to reduce humankind's aggressive nature would reduce the conflict between humankind's innate drives and his/her ability to satisfy these drives in culturally appropriate ways. If not given opportunity for release, the organism would manifest its need via another outlet, possibly of evil intent.

Behavioral theorists, with the common link of viewing the environment and society as the birthplace

of evil, regarded behavior as emanating primarily from environmental variables (Stevenson, 1987). B. F. Skinner regarded the human organism as a blank slate comprised of reflexes. Learning, or behavior, occurred as the organism's reflexes became conditioned to a particular stimulus in environmental operation. Individuals are not free agents in control of their behavior. Rather, we are all controlled by our environmental conditions in that any human organism exposed to the same variables both positive and negative or good and evil will respond with identical behavior. Changes in social structure and practice results in changes of behavior (Stevenson, 1987).

Karl Marx (Lethbridge, 1986) conceptualized the variable of a society's economic condition as working in conjunction with social conditions to affect human behavior. Marx (1970) said, "Society itself produces man as so is society produced by him" (p. 137). As economic activity fuels the activity of a society it also sets the tone of human social activity. Because a person is irrevocably a social animal, any form of social alienation results in maladaptative behavior (Lethbridge, 1986). Not surprisingly, Karl Marx (1975) claimed that private property was the cause of such

alienation, since it alienated humans from one another and made material ownership primary to social interaction. Marx said that as humanity increasingly becomes a cog in the wheels of economic machinery, the ills or evil acts of society will increase at a proportional level.

Eclectic theorists, such as Maslow, Rogers, and May, combine ideas from genetic and environmental theories of the presence of evil, retained a common theme that a person seeks to use her/his behavior to transcend her/his situation (Stevenson, 1987). The inherent capacities of human nature are needs that "clamor to be used" (Maslow, 1968, p. 201). These needs exert a constant force or pressure on the individual until they are satisfied. If not satisfied, the organism will experience deprivation, distress, and possible dysfunction, which could manifest in evil behavior (Geller, 1982).

Maslow (Goble, 1971) believed that individuals are motivated by five basic needs, which are species-wide, and are psychological as well as physiological. The needs, in the order in which they are generally desired, are: (a) physiological--the needs for physical survival, i.e., food, liquid, shelter, sex,

sleep and oxygen, (b) safety--the need for a predictable world, with consistency, fairness and some routine, (c) belongingness and love--the need for love, affection and belongingness, (d) esteem--the need for self respect and esteem from others, and (e) self-actualization--the need to become everything that one is capable of becoming. If these conditions are not met, the individual will be in distress and exhibit greater tendencies toward evil behavior.

Preconditions to basic need satisfaction include freedom to speak, freedom to do what one wishes as long as no harm is done to others, freedom of inquiry, freedom to defend one's self, justice, honesty, fairness, and order (Goble, 1971). Evil has the effect of reducing these preconditions, therefore making it more difficult to satisfy the basic needs of humans. For example, when an individual's civil rights are denied, these preconditions may even be nonexistent, thus severely limiting satisfaction.

According to Maslow (Geller, 1982), it is the balance between the psychological and physiological needs of the human organism and the ability of the human organism to satisfy these needs that leads to the health of the individual. Evil comes from outside the

individual when practices and institutions repress and frustrate the organism's inner nature. Maslow believed that cultures couldn't create human beings, but they could encourage or permit what is present in an embryonic state to become real and actual. It should also be noted that, according to Maslow, the individual bears responsibility for possessing awareness of physiological and psychological needs, and that invariably the choice of evil comes from within the individual.

Carl Rogers (1981) was another theorist who, like Maslow (Geller, 1982), believed that the deepest core of humanity, free from trappings of culture/society, was good. Rogers (1981) stated that, "In a psychological climate that is nurturant of growth and choice, I have never known an individual to choose the cruel or destructive path" (p. 8). Rogers maintained that it was cultural factors which led individuals to engage in evil behaviors. He believed that members of the human species were essentially constructive in their nature, but were damaged by their experience. Both Rogers and Maslow have been criticized for their views that only goodness lies at the core of humankind (Geller, 1982). Opponents of their view argue that

humans create culture and society, therefore, if culture and society are evil, evil rises from man, its creator.

Leonard Kohut (Tobin, 1991), like Rollo May (1982), viewed man as having more than just goodness at his core. Kohut (Tobin, 1991) saw man as having a bi-polar configuration with a grandiose self at one end and an idealized parent image at the other. Linking the two poles is what Kohut called a tension arc which functions to maintain congruity between the poles. The grandiose self guides the individual in her/his strivings for power and achievement while the idealized parent image is that which the individual incorporates as a social reference of how the individual thinks it is perceived by others. The balance between the two poles becomes precarious and prone to disequilibrium as the individual interacts with his/her environment. When the structure is out of balance, for instance when parental (social) expectations are not within the realm of the capacities of the individual, disturbed, hostile, and even destructive behavior becomes an attempt by the individual to preserve and maintain the self structure.

Kohut (Tobin, 1991) isolated the primary caregivers as the individuals who can have the greatest impact in the formation of a cohesive/dynamic core of the individual. This cohesive/dynamic core should mirror both social expectations and the individual strivings of the organism. As the discrepancy between the idealized parent image and the grandiose self become greater, so does the propensity for dysfunction. The process of increasing dysfunctionality takes place in the following manner: the human organism functions in a climate in which the balancing act between performing at a level of the perceived expectation of others and the level at which the individual is actually capable of functioning becomes too great. As the energy in the tension arc increases so does the propensity for evil behavior.

Eric Fromm (1963) was another theorist who proposed a bi-polar theory of humankind to explain the presence of evil. Fromm used the poles of necrophile (love of death) and biophile (love of life) to represent a continuum along which humans can be categorized, depending on the pole with which they are most closely associated. Love for life and love for death are not a dualism inherent in humanity, rather

they constitute a basic choice. Fromm reflected that it is the individual who has the ultimate choice between good and evil. According to Fromm, environmental and economic factors can be powerful influences in the development of the necrophilic or the biophilic individual. He believed that if a person's struggle to meet the basic needs of life (food, shelter, etc.) became too great, there would be insufficient energy left to love life, thus fostering the necrophilic side. Injustice or evil behavior of one social/cultural group over another group can also deprive the oppressed group of the basic need of dignity leading to a greater inclination toward necrophilic behavior by that group, such as Nazi Germany in World War II.

Fromm (1963) was in agreement with Karl Marx (Lethbridge, 1986) in believing that humankind's overzealous preoccupation with the consumption of material things compromises one's ability to live. In the act of destruction the individual proves herself/himself superior; he/she transcends life by destroying it. By destroying life the individual becomes superior over that which she/he could not create. Destructiveness and evil result from a deep

sense of powerlessness and impotence. Fromm also believed that the glorification of violence is not only dangerous, it is based on a false perception of what is actually happening. Fromm explained the presence of evil as an expression of an individual's desire to control her/his situation, to control her/his destiny. Acts of evil reflect the damage done to the human organism by the environment, but the choice to act with evil intent is made within the individual.

Discussion

From the various theories presented, some interesting themes regarding the presence of evil come to light, the first and obvious being the origin of evil. Is evil present within the psyche of the individual lying in wait to be used under the right conditions, or are we socialized or taught to react in evil ways by our culture? In other words, does evil originate on the inside or on the outside of an individual? The choice of evil is usually explained as originating within humankind (Stevenson, 1987). Geller (1982) stated that theorists of the humanist tradition, such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers believed man to be good at his deepest core, but both contended that

the human organism makes the choice between good and evil behaviors in the final analysis.

Another common theme shared by the theorists presented was the vital influence that the environment exerted over the individual. Thomas Merton (Frank et al., 1963) said that societal images tend to mirror the dominant images of the society's understanding of human nature. If this statement is true, what do the images of our society indicate about our understanding of human nature? If our environment shapes and molds our behavior, as has been suggested, is it possible to structure the environmental setting to maximize the human potential existing within it? In relation to this question Carl Rogers (Stevenson, 1987) suggested that, "Our urgent social problems cry out for more understanding of human nature. It is true the proper study of mankind is man" (p. 124).

Rogers (1981), Maslow (1968), and May (1982) share a common union on the benefit of self exploration and self examination to uncover the hidden agenda of the psyche. "I believe that any real change in man depends on the discovery of one's self" (Fromm, 1963, p. 55).

If, as has been presented, humankind retains the power of choice prior to the engagement of behavior,

Fromm (1963) may have been correct in his assertion that as more people become aware of the difference between good and evil, it may help restore a balance in the individual and in our world.

Or can it be, as B. F. Skinner (May, 1982) contended, that we are forever controlled by our environment, free only to the extent that social conditions permit?

Is the hope of an environment free of evil a plausible or realistic hope? Can we understand ourselves and each other well enough to resist the evil impulses that enter our thoughts and actions? Roy Menninger (Frank et al., 1963) provided his answers to these questions:

To live in a psychic world where all is good and pure, where struggle and conflict is absent, predisposes us to a kind of lotus-eating indolence with an indifference to everything else. The dangers of satiety are fully as great as those of deprivation. Struggle is life and life is an incessant sequence of struggles. (p. 39)

Eric Fromm (1963) said of evil, "an awareness of our pathological situation, while not yet a cure, is a first step" (p. 28). If more people become aware of

the difference between good and evil, and its roots, it might restore a balance.

Implications for School Counselors

In conclusion, it appears that a knowledge of the major theories of the origins of evil may assist a counselor in better understanding some of the factors involved with an individual who has been harmed by evil. It could also help the counselor to work more effectively according to the student's needs.

A knowledge of these theories would allow the counselor to determine which theory or combination of different theories could be used to most effectively help a specific student. The counselor needs to realize that these are just theories, but that he/she can use them to better understand how evil can cause harm or pain in an individual.

In using the genetic approach of Lorenz (Stevenson, 1987), important would be placed on finding an acceptable societal outlet for aggression to replace any damaging outlets currently displayed by the student. The counselor can use the humanist approach of Abraham Maslow (1968) or Carl Rogers (1981) to see a student as good at her/his deepest core, but having the choice to decide between good or evil. If the

counselor uses the perspective of B. F. Skinner (Stevenson, 1987), she/he might emphasize how our environment shapes our behavior, and that we can structure the environment to maximize the student's ability to deal with evil.

The counselor can use these different theories by realizing that different students may need different theoretical approaches to deal with the problems of being harmed by evil. The counselor needs to understand each student's problem and context to best determine if the individual needs the support of a Carl Rogers (1981), the environmental structure and reinforcement of Skinner (Stevenson, 1987), or culturally acceptable outlets for aggression as believed by Lorenz (Stevenson, 1987).

From this study, one could conclude that there are several theories regarding the origins of evil. Certainty of accuracy is impossible to demonstrate: therefore, people will choose whatever seems to fit their individual contexts. Counselors and others need to be aware of the different philosophies and beliefs of their clients and to be responsive to these beliefs as well as to the varying cultural interpretations regarding evil and evil behavior. It should be noted

that cultural perceptions affect both counselor and client, and the counselor must be cautious and sensitive to work within the parameters of the client's cultural system.

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