

## HIERARCHY IN INNOVATIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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Innovative Psychologists were a group of lay therapists who practiced a system of psycho-therapy based for the most part on Transactional Analysis and Gestalt Psychology.<sup>1</sup> In a small building referred to as the center, the psychologists conducted group-therapy sessions of various types. The focus of this paper is to demonstrate that although the repudiation of hierarchies was part of the basic doctrine of Innovative Psychology, to the observer their system had a hierarchical structure. Within this hierarchy, power to make administrative decisions was highly valued. The options for action available to each individual were limited by their relative position in the hierarchy. The assumption that people in Innovative Psychology sought power is therefore useful in explaining their behavior.

### A brief history.

Innovative Psychology began as a course taught at a free university in 1969. During a period of unrest at a local state university, two therapists set up an Innovative Psychology center in a nearby free clinic. Here they provided counseling for people suffering from psychological trauma caused by the riots on campus. After several months, however, the Innovative Psychology group was branded as authoritarian and elitist by the staff of the clinic and expelled from it. Until early in 1970 Innovative Psychology practiced therapy under the auspices of a community health project. Once again, however, there was conflict over "principles

and manner", and they were asked to leave the project.

By December 1971, Innovative Psychology had a center of its own in a residential neighborhood. Prior to the purchase of this center, five of the original therapists declared themselves to be the center's planning group, an administrative board in charge of policy-making decisions.<sup>2</sup> Their function was to implement collective action and to relegate work to the other members of Innovative Psychology. For a long time this group fought against allowing new representatives on the planning board, but in October 1971, group members and trainees staged a revolt by demanding and finally receiving representation in the planning group.

#### Methodology.

My entrée into Innovative Psychology was through my role as group-leader trainee. In August 1971 I began my training by attending six weekly discussions about the philosophy and techniques of Innovative Therapy. My formal training commenced in October when I was assigned to a training group collective which consisted of eight trainees and one trainer. My role as trainee afforded me an acknowledged role at the center, and earned me access to the six introductory lectures during which the Innovative Psychologists' therapy program was presented in detail. As a trainee, I was able to gather data by participant observation. I attempted to validate my interpretations of the data by checking my conclusions against those of current and former members of Innovative Psychology through informal interviews.

#### Basic principles of Innovative Psychology.

The radical therapist was used as the basic text for the center

staff and trainees. In it were the often-quoted tenets and philosophy of Innovative Psychology. The book itself was a collection of articles written by radical therapists from different parts of the United States. Two of the psychologists at the center had written several articles in the book.

The main tenets of Innovative Psychology were:

- 1) In the absence of oppression humans will live in harmony with each other.
- 2) Alienation is the essence of all psychiatric conditions.
- 3) All alienation is the result of oppression about which the oppressed has been deceived, that is, the oppressed person is "mystified" into believing that he or she is not oppressed.

The therapists felt that liberation from oppression could be achieved through awareness of this condition and through contact with a like-minded group of people. For this reason, Innovative Psychology was only to be practiced as group therapy.

The following equations were considered basic to Innovative Psychology:

Oppression + Deception = Alienation

Oppression + Awareness = Anger

Contact + Awareness = Liberation<sup>3</sup>

#### Groups and activities.

Activities in the center revolved around different kinds of meetings. Introduction to the activities of the center occurred in a session called contact rap which was an informal discussion period. Contact

rap was open to anyone who either had a problem and wished to discuss it, or who was lonely and wanted to "make contact" with other people. Contact rap was held five nights a week in hour and a half sessions. Each training collective was in charge of leading contact rap for a week.

Another type of meeting at the center was for the purpose of solving specific problems. Unlike contact rap, which was open to the public and varied in the number of people attending, each problem-solving group was a fixed collection of about ten clients who attended closed, rather conventional, group therapy sessions on a regular weekly basis. Each group member related a personal problem which he or she wanted to solve and then made a "contract" with the group to change along the chosen lines. Most of the problem-solving groups had two leaders who had been specially trained to direct this type of therapy.

A third type of meeting was the training meeting for relatively new therapists, called trainees. The five training groups, called training collectives, met once a week to learn how to lead problem-solving groups.

The trainers who were teaching the training collectives also met as a group at the center. These meetings were forums where trainers could discuss the problems they were having with their training collectives. These sessions were led by five of the Innovative Psychologists who had organized the center and trained the staff. To avoid confusion, the five senior Innovative Psychologists will be designated as  $T_1$  and the newer therapists as  $T_2$ .

Finally, the planning group met once a week. This group consisted of all the members of  $T_1$ , representatives of  $T_2$ , two individuals from

each of the training collectives, and one person who represented the problem-solving group members.

Innovative Psychologists' view of hierarchies.

One of the major criticisms that Innovative Psychologists had of the established psychiatric system was that hierarchies are used to keep the patients and the psychiatric trainees in positions of inferiority. Innovative Psychologists objected strenuously to this hierarchical structure. Their attitude toward hierarchies was strongly expressed in The radical therapist:

When people who are interested in radical changes organize groups they quite naturally wish to organize them along lines which differ from the authoritarian and alienating basis on which oppressive establishment groups are usually organized.<sup>4</sup>

The greatest single evil in mankind is the oppression of human being by human being. Oppression ordinarily expresses itself in the form of hierarchical situations in which one person makes the decisions for others.<sup>5</sup>

The author adds that there are three hierarchies which are necessary or "natural": mother-child, needy and fulfiller of need, and craftsman-apprentice. But, even these hierarchies can be extended too far so that, as a result,

Certain persons are kept in an inferior position to others with respect to their skill. This of course is the basis for most university and professional schools and is again an example of where a natural hierarchy can be extended into an oppressive and evil one.<sup>6</sup>

Innovative Psychology hierarchy.

In general, the power to make policy decisions was highly valued by Innovative Psychologists. The superordinate individuals in the hier-

archy were those people who make the important decisions regarding the group's activities. Because the planning meetings were the arenas where power to make these decisions was tested, it was in this setting that the hierarchy took on the most importance and where its workings were the most explicit.

The following description of the five relative statuses in Innovative Psychology does not present a complete picture of all the rights and obligations concomitant with each status. For the purpose of this paper, only those rights having to do with the administration of Innovative Psychology will be outlined.

The individuals with the lowest status were the contact rappers. The attitude of the Innovative therapists to the contact rappers was apparent in discussions held after contact rap. The training group I participated in usually talked about how terrible contact rap was, how dishonest the contact rappers were, and what a waste of time it was to talk to such "lazy people, lazy in that the contact rappers were not in problem-solving groups, that is, they had not made the commitment to work on their problems on a weekly basis in a therapy group. This commitment was seen as essential to the working out of psychological and social problems. The contact rappers were virtually without policy-making rights and had no representatives on the planning board. Contact rap could be cancelled or the hours shortened at any time without prior notice.

The next level of the hierarchy was occupied by the problem-solving group members. As was mentioned earlier, it was not until October 1971 that group members, as they were called, were allowed to attend to policy

meetings. This reluctance to give clients representation in the planning group is interesting in light of the fact that Innovative Psychology took a strong stand against hierarchies in mental hospitals and clinics which do not allow the patients to have a say in policy decisions.<sup>7</sup>

The third level of the hierarchy was occupied by the trainees in the training collectives. Their position was higher than that of the group members in that they were the first to be given representation at the planning meetings. Also, the trainees were allowed a greater number of representatives at the planning meetings. However, there were rarely more than two trainee representatives present at a meeting. The reason for such poor representation seemed to be that in the collectives themselves, the trainers frequently offered to represent their own training collectives because trainers went to the meetings anyway. The result of this practice was that very few of the trainees ever attended a planning meeting, and the number of people representing the trainees at each meeting was small.

Finally, there were two levels of trainers. The higher level ( $T_1$ ) corresponded to the five therapists who founded the Innovative Psychology center. The lower level ( $T_2$ ) was trained by the higher level group ( $T_1$ ). There was a great deal of friction between the two groups of trainers. One explanation of this friction was that  $T_2$  were now group leaders themselves and therefore felt themselves to be equal to  $T_1$ . As such, they felt they should have equal say in running the center.  $T_1$ , however, still saw  $T_2$  as their former students and were unwilling to give up any of their own power.

Even though trainees had obtained the right to attend planning meetings, their ability and that of group members to influence planning decisions was minimized by their low status in the center's hierarchy. The following incident illustrates their minimal effect. At the planning meeting Jane proposed that there be a new group formed to disseminate information about Innovative Psychology in the community. A group member and a trainee expressed their desire to be in the new group. Bob stated that the group should be for leaders only (i.e.,  $T_1$  and  $T_2$ ). Jane, a member of  $T_1$ , then said "OK, I'll be in it, Harriet will be in it, and you'll be in it too, won't you Doris?" The group member who had volunteered for the new group expressed her feelings of subordination and stated she felt that nothing she said at the planning meetings "ever makes any difference". That is, she had no power to effect the decisions made at the meeting even though all representatives were, ideally, supposed to be equal.

The upper echelon ( $T_1$ ) trainers were rank-ordered with Bob in the most influential position, Harriet next, then Doris, Caron, and Jane. This ranking was quite evident in the first planning meeting when the initial forty-five minutes were spent in establishing a pecking order. Bob repudiated any suggestions or information offered by the four women but especially comments made by Harriet. Harriet in her turn reacted negatively to the other women in the  $T_1$  group and to everyone in  $T_2$ . Not only were suggestions made by lower status people negated by those of higher status, but any attempts at humor were squelched by those in higher positions. At one point, Jane and Caron began to joke, whereupon Harriet made an obscene gesture at them. They immediately ceased their humorous



interactions. In another example of reminding people of their relative positions, a  $T_2$  trainer suggested that all group members and trainees should be allowed to attend the planning meetings. Bob immediately shouted that trainees never did any work and are "full of hot air" and, therefore, should not be allowed on the planning group. Bob cited no evidence for his allegations, nor was his opinion challenged by the others present. Even though unsupported by evidence, attacks such as these were rarely challenged, because the underlying issue was, it seems, not logic or truth, but power.

The workings of a system are often made more explicit when an individual in that system tries to manipulate it in order to maximize value. During a planning meeting, Jane (the lowest-ranking member of  $T_1$ ) tried to raise her own status. She did this by imitating certain behavior patterns usually associated with the higher status positions. That is, she made very bold, self-assertive statements about how she felt the center should be managed. The tone that she used was the very self-assured, rather hard tone that only the top  $T_1$  people had used until then. Both Bob and Harriet systematically negated everything she said, but Jane seemed to be oblivious to these attacks. Finally, when Jane stated that she would continue to use Bob's house for her problem-solving group meetings, Bob said very sternly "I want to talk to you about that". Jane then became very quiet and did not speak for the remainder of the meeting. Bob had not been able to overtly call her down on her status-climbing, because the hierarchy was covert, but by catching her on a point of etiquette he reminded her of her lower position.<sup>8</sup> By making claims on Bob's house,

she was asserting her power in an area in which, according to wider social values, she had no right to do so. Therefore, Bob had a legitimate reason to curb her assertion of power.

The members of  $T_1$  had a very interesting way of legitimizing their right to all of the administrative power. Caron stated at one point in a planning meeting that they ( $T_1$ ) did not want all of the power, but that they seemed to do all of the important work. This statement was perhaps true, but for a very simple reason. The original five therapists chose the planning group on the basis of the amount of work already done. Since the five had been in Innovative Psychology for the longest period of time, they had done the most work and, of course, became the planning group. However, once in the planning group, they delegated all of the important work to be done to themselves through their positions as administrators and, thus, created a self-perpetuating system. The five could quite validly complain, and often did during the planning meetings, that no one ever did any work but themselves and in this way justify their reluctance to allow any of the "lazy" trainees or group members into the planning meetings. Thus, the hierarchy became self-perpetuating.

### Interviews.

Data collected in interviews with Innovative Psychology members corroborated the thesis that a hierarchical structure exists in Innovative Psychology.

There were a great many verbal indications demonstrating the recognition group members and trainees gave to the higher status of the  $T_1$  trainers. In my interviews with members of Innovative Psychology, trainees

called the original planning group "the big wigs", "the heavies", or "the higher-ups". When asked about her experiences with the Innovative Psychology system, a trainee related the following incident from a planning meeting:

Although all of the representatives from the training collectives, problem-solving groups, T<sub>1</sub> and T<sub>2</sub> were at the meeting with the exception of Harriet and Bob,<sup>2</sup> one of the T<sub>1</sub> trainers stated that since all of the "key" people were<sup>1</sup> missing, the meeting would be short "because everything would have to be rediscussed later".

Jim, a former Innovative Psychologist, complained bitterly about the oppressive hierarchy. He said that Bob was on "top" and he only allowed women near the "top" so that he could dominate them.

Finally, one of the T<sub>2</sub> trainers not only corroborated my view of the pecking order but added that "Bob and Harriet are professionals and they won't let anyone forget it". This comment was interesting in that neither Bob nor Harriet ever mention their advanced degrees.<sup>9</sup> They had more subtle ways, such as patterns of deportment, of reminding the other members of Innovative Psychology that they were indeed professionals.

#### Note on hierarchies.

There are two passages from The radical therapist which illustrate the Innovative Psychologist's view of established psychiatric systems:

Hierarchical systems obviate change and training programs like practice tend to stultify and wound many people . . . Artificial barriers are created everywhere: between senior and junior staff, between therapists from various disciplines, between "professionals" and laymen.<sup>10</sup>

Many of these same criticisms can be made against the Innovative Psychology hierarchy. Not only did they discourage innovation, but they also

set up covert distinctions between senior and junior staff, and between professionals and laymen. The second passage states:

The model of training will change from hierarchical obsessional, master pupil interaction to a more open, popular, democratic form. All whose ideas and insights are valid will be heard.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, this approach presents a problem as to who decides what is valid and what criteria are to be used in this decision. It may be hypothesized, however, that all new ideas were not so readily welcomed not because they were invalid, but because of the status of the individuals who proposed them.

#### Non-hierarchical aspects of Innovative Psychology.

There were situations in which the non-hierarchical value was stressed, such as when a low-status job (like cleaning up the center, making repairs, collecting money to support the center, or any job not related to policy decisions) needed to be done. In order to encourage trainees and group members to do this work, the upper echelon trainers stressed status equality. In these situations, the  $T_1$  and  $T_2$  trainers talked in terms of "our center" and how "we must all work together to keep our center going". This democratic attitude was in accord with the ideal pattern of democratic, popular, and non-hierarchical behavior posited in the Innovative Psychology literature and lectures. Thus, by appealing to the normative model, the superordinate individuals tried to evoke the desired moral behavior from their subordinates. The subordinates could also appeal to this same moral code. However, when they did they were often accused of playing "lifter than thou"<sup>12</sup> or simply ignored.

### Summary and conclusions.

By verbally calling down those who wished to raise their status and by delegating all of the important decisions to themselves, thus limiting the choices open to the people in subordinate positions, the superordinate Innovative Psychologists maintained their positions of power. In interactions with subordinates, individuals occupying the highest positions in the echelon had more power to choose which status (i.e., status of equal or superordinate) to appeal to in a given situation.

The subordinate individuals endeavored to maximize their power by seeking representation on the policy-making body. Once granted this representation, they tried to exercise their rights as planning group members although they were often frustrated in this attempt.

It can be seen that power was an important value in transactions within the Innovative Psychology system. The interactants manipulated their options in order to raise or maintain their status. All of these choices and manipulations took place within, and were limited by, the hierarchical structure of social system.

Although Innovative Psychologists claimed that their system was non-hierarchical, it would appear from the data presented in this paper that Innovative Psychology had a hierarchical administrative system. This hierarchy was perpetuated by the fact that those in positions of power were reluctant to share this power with other members of the group.

In the year after this research was conducted, problems stemming from conflicts within the hierarchy resulted in a split in the Innovative Psychology ranks.  $T_1$  was accused by many of the  $T_2$  therapists of being elitist and authoritarian.  $T_1$  countered by banishing the dissenters from

the center. The dissident group started their own off-shoot branch of Innovative Psychology which was conducted in therapist's homes.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Innovative Psychology is not the real name of the organization that I studied.

<sup>2</sup>The real names of these therapists will not be used in this article. They will be called, in order of their seniority, Bob (the most senior), Harriet, Doris, Caron and Jane.

<sup>3</sup>The above information is a summary of pp. 3-7 of The radical therapist.

<sup>4</sup>Agel, 1971, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup>Agel, 1971, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Agel, 1971, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup>The second chapter of The radical therapist deals with the need for client control of mental hospitals and therapy programs.

<sup>8</sup>Here, Jane is what Barth calls an "incumbent of a status". By imitating a kind of behavior identified with a certain higher status, she is playing as if she were actually of this higher status. Through her behavior she seeks to convince others that she is indeed what she claims to be. See Barth, 1966, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>Both have Ph.D.'s.

<sup>10</sup>Agel, 1971, p. xvii.

<sup>11</sup>Agel, 1971, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup>Agel, 1971, pp. 18-22. This is a ploy whereby an individual tries

to demonstrate that he or she is more radical than others in Innovative Psychology.



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