

THE CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

Sr Mariella Agius, B.A. (Hons.), M.A. (Cons. Psych.)
Counselling Psychologist

Here in Malta, the Clinical Psychologist is a mental health professional holding an M.A. of M.Sc. degree in Psychology and clinical experience in assessment and psychotherapy. Clinical Psychology is that field of Psychology concerned with the assessment, treatment and prevention of maladaptive behaviour.

The Clinical Psychologist, ideally works within a multidisciplinary team. This entails a great deal of consultation with the other professionals on the team. Typically the team is composed of a Consultant Psychiatrist, his Senior Medical Officer, the Houseman or Housewoman, an Occupational Therapist, a Social Worker, Psychiatric Nurses and their assistants.

Referrals.

Patients are referred to the Clinical Psychologist for Assessment and Treatment.

Self Referrals

Often, the patient suffering from a mental illness, and members of the immediate environment are initially in a state of denial and fear of the stigma attached to mental illness. As a compromise they often prefer to go first to the Psychologist. A skilled and empathic Psychologist makes a very valuable contribution at this point. He or she helps the client and his or her family:

- build trust in the helping professionals,
- accept the fact that there is a mental illness
- accept immediate referral to a competent Psychiatrist
- accept the fact that he or she might need psychotropic medication
- If the patient is psychotic and a danger to himself/herself or others it is the duty of the skilled Psychologist to help motivate all concerned to ensure immediate admission of the patient to an acute ward either at Mt. Carmel Hospital or at the Psychiatric Unit.

Other self referred clients might not need the intervention of a Psychiatrist. In such cases the Psychologist provides the necessary assessment and therapy to help the individual, the couple or the family as the case might be. Such referrals are often made by persons who know the Psychologist to whom the referral is made, from members of other helping professions such as members of the Clergy, GPs, Lawyers and so on.

Hospital Referrals

The Consultant Psychiatrist or one of his representatives on the team refer patients from Mt Carmel Hospital, the Psychiatric Unit or Mental Out Patients Dept. for assessment and therapeutic intervention.

Psychological Assessment

This is done by means of:

assessment interviews
clinical observation of behaviour
the use of psychological tests

Direct means: assessment interviews and clinical observation of behaviour

The thoroughness and accuracy of assessment made by the clinical psychologist can determine the extent to which an individual's problems are understood and how well his or her needs are met through therapy. To this end the Psychologist's goal of assessment is to identify and understand the individual's symptoms within the context of his or her overall level of functioning and environment. This includes determining the nature and severity of any maladaptive behaviour and understanding the conditions that may have caused and/or be maintaining it. To do this the clinician must gather, weigh and synthesise as much information as possible about the client. Often this needs to be done in a brief period of time perhaps even with very limited information. Equally important to evaluate are the client's strengths and resources, including such personal factors as motivation for treatment, capacity for change, ability to participate in the treatment programme, available support from family and others. With all this information in hand, the clinician must then arrive at a working formulation concerning what can be done to promote the individual's well-being.

Indirect means: the use of Psychological tests

Two types of Psychological Tests may be used:

Intelligence tests:- Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children (revised) WISC-R
Weschler Adult Intelligence Scale (revised) WAIS-R

Personality tests:- Projective test e.g. Rorschach; TAT
Objective tests e.g. MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory)

The Clinical Psychologist might make use of Psychological Tests to help him or her get, **perhaps**, for the simple reason that here in Malta none of the instruments mentioned above have as yet been translated into Maltese or standardised against a Maltese population. As such the validity and reliability of such measurements is questionable. Projective tests can be

more reliable. However, a great deal depends on the skill of the Psychologist using these instruments, because the profile depends entirely on his or her competence in giving a dynamic interpretation to the material produced by the patient or client.

Other Projective Techniques such as of Sandtray, Art, Dream Interpretation, can provide the Clinical Psychologist with invaluable information about the patient and his psychological state at the time of assessment.

Test results are often needed by Psychiatrists and Psychologists:
for the purpose of research
to substantiate forensic reports

Treatment

Much depends on the dynamism of the Clinical Psychologist when it comes to providing effective treatment. Ideally the Clinical Psychologist is a person well trained in:-

- dynamic therapy
- interventions with systems such as the family
- group therapy
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy which is the treatment of choice for depressive illness,
- other brief therapies.

The treatment provided by the Clinical Psychologist needs to be tailored to the needs of the individual here and now. This might Be:

- crisis intervention as in the case of fighting couples....abusive parents...rape victims and their families...survivors of tragedies whether personal or otherwise and so on.
 - brief therapy
- or
- long term therapy

Child Guidance Clinic

Children are a very special population when it comes to psychologist involvement. Apart from providing support and initial assessment very good outcomes can be achieved in very short periods of time if the assessment is correct and the intervention is timely. The Psychologist keeps in mind that the child is often the identified patient but that the root of the trouble lies within the system and the need of the members of the system to maintain homeostasis. It is the duty of the skilled Psychologist to reframe the problem and help bring about change in the system without threatening homeostasis.

Preventing Maladaptive Behaviour.

Another task of the Psychologist is to help prevent dysfunctional behaviour. His or her involvement in Community Psychiatry is very much needed that the main aim is the empowerment of the client/patient. To this end the Clinical Psychologist often finds himself or herself in the role of EDUCATOR.

Talks on radio... public lectures... seminars...to parents and carers are very much sought by various bodies. A great deal of this work of education goes on even during sessions on a one to one basis and in family and group therapy.

Consultation and Supervision

More and more the Clinical Psychologist is called to provide supervision to Social Workers, and other carers and counsellors who find themselves dealing with cases that need psychological intervention but are unable to receive it due to the shortage of psychologists available for such interventions. Various agencies are offering services where counselling is an intrinsic part of the programme offered to persons seeking help at the agency. Keeping in mind that COUNSELLING IS ALWAYS FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE, the Clinical Psychologist is always ready to provide the necessary training to prevent iatrogenesis and help create new knowledge.

Conclusion

As a member of the multidisciplinary team the Clinical Psychologist has a valid contribution to make. His or her sound assessment and timely intervention may bring about a dynamic change in the person who presents with dysfunctional behaviour. Such timely intervention often prevents the person, with a problem of mental health, from becoming institutionalised. Ultimately the aim of the Clinical Psychologist is always to improve the standard and quality of life and to alleviate disability.