BASIC PRINCIPLES WHEN WORKING WITH INDIVIDUALS, HOUSEHOLDS AND COMMUNITIES

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The instinct to survive and the dialogue of opposites

The basic instinct to survive exists in all life forms and is exemplified by phototropism in plants, and by the principles of evolution in animals. Perhaps this is debatable, or perhaps this is a place to start, a place of agreement between all of us in this room?

The moment of life and existence itself, however, is not enough. There must also be growth for life to continue. For growth to happen, however, there must be tension. At the cellular level, for example, there must be a condition of tension for cells to divide in the process of meiosis. At the individual and community level too, tension leads to growth. But the process takes place at a particular tempo if it is healthy. In all life forms there are also relative 'plateaus', times of 'rest', or equilibrium conditions, which are devoid of tension. Environmental change, for example, during prolonged and extreme drought conditions creates tension and stress at multiple levels within society. Benign environmental conditions also occur with relatively regular frequency. Whether each of them becomes permanent depends on what we do with them. The interaction between tension and equilibrium involves a 'dialogue of opposites'. This process is natural, and occurs within human learning and

adaptation as well. Managing this 'dialogue of opposites' is a key element of healthy living at the individual, household and community level.

Human motivation: the 'struggle for recognition'

Adaptation is another word for 'survival skills'. Adaptation refers to behaviours which facilitate survival of the human species. Humans are more complex than other life forms, among other things, because they are dependent for relatively long periods of time before they have the capacity to survive on their own; and because they have the capacity for self- and other-consciousness. A number of authors and practitioners in psychology have suggested that all human behaviour, including adaptive and maladaptive behaviour, can be traced back to the struggle for recognition.

I use Hegel's concept of the struggle for recognition , described by Sembou as: "By the term 'struggle for recognition' is meant 'the struggle of individuals for the recognition of their person by others." . This concept implies an acknowledgement of the dignity of the personhood

(as opposed to merely the instrumental value) of people. The importance of recognition relates to the African concept of "Ubuntu", where "the possession of the qualities of personhood is reflected in people's relationship with others". Ubuntu is characterised by caring, just and respectful relationships." . Ramphele describes Ubuntu as: "one's personhood makes sense only in relation to others" . Ramphele points to the great human contradiction contained in the spirit of Ubuntu, which emphasizes the significance of integrating individual uniqueness with common good. She places the challenge of finding individual affirmation within the context of, and as a significant part of the collective growth. In other words, the success of Ubuntu demands that the needs of the individual and collective (at all levels) must be integrated rather than one being realised at the expense of the other. Bestowing recognition on the unique needs and emotions of another facilitates the experience of 'authentic pride', or perceptions of human legitimacy and belonging, both for the person/institution who is recognized, as well as the person/institution who is capable of recognizing this worth . Thus, the emotional correlate of recognition is authentic pride and self-respect . It is more likely that people will struggle to protect that which they value than that which they deem worthless. It is evident that this concept informs, and speaks directly to the advantages of democratic functioning where the voices of all citizens are deemed important to the healthy functioning of any group or society. In other words, people are more likely to adapt when they have individual and group self-respect.

When there is no recognition, when it is withheld or denied, 'alienation' takes place. The way I intend it, it is reflected in the Marxist concept, cited in Hook as a "loss of reality, to the situation where human beings are estranged from their own bodies, from the natural world and from their potentially universal essences." . It's emotional counterpart is hubris, or false pride. These concepts are critical when working with communities and individuals during times of increased stress including increased environmental stress.

Identity: the tool for recognition

The psychological tool used for recognizing others, and gaining recognition from others is 'identity'. This consists of all those aspects of human beings that are 'givens'. They are not up to choice, although the way in which they are used can be more or less adaptive. The way in which identity is perceived can be divided into five main categories:

- Physical – relates to concrete parts of us, often that which can be seen, measured etc.

- Emotional – operates with a logic that sometimes defies 'intellectual' logic;

- Intellectual – relates to left-brain, linear logic and thought;

- Creative – mostly creative, right-brain logic and thought;

- Spiritual - not necessarily religious, but refers to the way in which each of us is unique in the world – relates in essence, to recognizing and being recognized in the world.

The five aspects, and their needs, are common to all human beings. However, the way in which we experience and satisfy them differs between individuals and groups. The many different ways in which they are experienced and satisfied is closely related to the ways in which recognition has, or has not taken place in our historical individual and social environment. For this reason, no one person or group can be an expert on another. We are our own experts. Each of the aspects of our identity relates to the other and when they are in balance we experience a sense of authenticity, and we tend to be the most powerful and adaptive in our own right. Within each category, balance is also important. The skill for development workers and advocacy groups when working in communities during times of environmental stress is:

- to find out, identify, recognize, affirm and respect existing local knowledge and expertise;

- to work with individuals and communities in identifying their problems; and then

- to work with communities towards solutions which acknowledge the physical, emotional, creative, spiritual and intellectual needs of all within the community.

Most psychologists work particularly with emotions. Emotions can be understood in two categories: those which society generally sees as positive and those which it claims to be negative. However, like any other part of our bodies, there is nothing 'right' or 'wrong' about emotions – they just are. And every single emotion has a function, and an adaptive role. What we do with them is up to choice, and may be more or less adaptive. The 'positive' ones revolve around comfort. We all aim at having and receiving positive emotions even though we do not always learn much from them. The 'negative' emotions, on the other hand, create the tension necessary for growth and learning. Without them, we do not grow or adapt. The degree to which we can transform the uncomfortable ones, such as 'shame', in action, leads to comfortable emotions, such as 'pride'.

Learning: recognition of one's potential to adapt

At the moment of birth, all we know is the very basis necessary to survive, such as to cry when we feel uncomfortable or hungry, or to defecate and urinate to rid our bodies of extraneous material not needed for healthy growth. What the rest of the world is, its worth and how it functions is taught to us, both intentionally and unintentionally by others. This includes what we are and what our worth is.

The people who teach us, more often than not teach us what they have learned from their parents, the media, the world around them and this is often outdated, or relevant to people in very different circumstances. Also, intentional learning often conflicts with unintentional learning. These issues lead to confusion and, often, low self-esteem. We begin to distrust our own knowledge, even our own needs and emotions – ourselves.

Learning is often accompanied by processes of punishment and reward, which make some ways of dealing with our identities more or less likely. When we are punished whenever our emotions or needs differ from the desires of those around us, we are moulded into passive obedient personalities. In other words, we are manipulated / forced into living according to others' identities. At the same time, given that recognition is the source of survival and motivation, distrust of one's self is the biggest obstacle to adaptation to change.

When the expression of our unique emotions and needs is met with recognition, it is easier for all aspects of our identities, including creativity (needed to find new solutions to new problems) to develop in a balanced way. Because the identity is more balance, it is more robust and is able to tolerate, even welcome resistance (as an opportunity for growth) but work with tension with respect. These personalities more easily develop the ability to critically question, but in a respectful way. This personality style tends to be more conducive to adapting and dealing with new situations. At the core, this personality style trusts and respects the dignity and expertise of self-knowledge of individuals and groups. It is the foundation, the starting block before any growth or adaptation is possible.

In summary, it is essential for those of us working in communities affected by environmental change to understand the importance of stress for personal and community growth. When environmental change and tension are seen as catastrophic, we tend to become victims to the environment. This is more likely to lead to disrespecting the environment as well as our own potential, resulting in shame results. On the other hand, when such tension is viewed as an opportunity within which identities can be fully tested, we open up the capacity for authentic community pride to emerge.

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