

‘Impressions of ‘being-there’ in Two Colleges of Further Education where the majority of the student body are not-White’

Abstract:

In this paper, I have chosen an area of literature which is relevant to my own practice of counselling and psychotherapy, and compared and contrasted my own understanding of student’s experience of ‘being-there’ in two different colleges of further education in a way that emphasises two points: Firstly, that learning how to maintain one’s own mental health is an important and integral part of a young person’s learning process; and, secondly, that counselling and psychotherapy in educational establishments where there are a significant number of young people whose ethnic and cultural identities are not-White, needs to address the possibility that it too, can contribute to the development of the ‘disaffected adult’ where reproduces and reinforces the College’s failure to acknowledge the negative of experiences ‘being-there’ can have in-relation with it’s students.

Unfortunately, Existential components of the psychotherapeutic literature that interests me, (i.e. importance of ‘race’ in interpersonal relations), seems very sparse to say the least; however, I hope to apply the central tenets of Existential Philosophy and practice to the description of students’ experiences of being in two different Colleges. By this, I mean Husserl’s phenomenology, or psychological-phenomenological reduction, which aims to provide as full a description of the phenomenon, (i.e. in this case the sense of powerlessness within educational institutions), as possible without intellectualising about the phenomena in the first instance.

My phenomenological project is to describe the student’s experience of *being-there* in college without drawing on my own experience and intellect to determine what this might mean for me, or the student. I rely totally on the student’s interpretations of what is happening for them, without evaluating the validity of these interpretations for myself, or anyone else (Husserl, 1990/1970). This places students’ experiences in context, (i.e. the College of Further Education), and allows for further exploration which addresses their concerns as physical, social, personal, and spiritual modes of existence (van Deurzen-Smith, 1997). These subjective accounts of everyday experience are always retrospective, but overtime it transpired that it was what past subjective experience might mean for the student as s/he projects him/her self into future time and space that seems to cause him/her concern (May, 1994, p65-71).

It must be said that students have been referred to me, as the student counsellor because they themselves, or their tutors, have discovered that their ways of being-in-the-world appear to be interfering with the student’s learning process. In other words, someone in authority has decided that the student is at risk of failing. The tutor has come to the conclusion that unless the student changes his/her behaviour, s/he will not learn whatever is necessary to complete the course, satisfactorily. The College

had decided what the criteria for satisfactory completion are, and the student must then decide whether s/he chooses to comply. Students are required to conform. The students' freedom is determined by his/her limit situation – the College, in the Kierkegaardian sense, but for people of colour this experience of freedom is not experienced in the same way as it is for White students in the College. We are required to exist within the parameters set by the college, parameters that bind us all. Determining where those parameters or boundaries of existence are within the college environment is something that has challenged us all at some point in our lives, and when confronted with such challenges we must all make choose how to proceed. These decisions are vitally important, and sometimes students may need to evaluate limit situations without fear of reprimand.

During my encounters with students, I hope to offer students the opportunity to look closely at the way they are in-relation with the College, their peers and members of staff, themselves, and with the goals in life. I might illustrate this delineation and interrelatedness (Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Jaspers; 1968), by referring to the experience of one of my client. The student is a 17 year old, Bengali-speaking young woman who presents escorted by her tutor for counselling. She begins by telling me about her experience being with another student, and describing this experience as being emotionally distressing. She said that, 'whenever she passes this student she is met with jeers and laughing, and she does not know why'. She says that, 'she knows the students who seems to be inciting this response but she doesn't understand 'why' he's doing it'. Already, the client has decided that her experience of being-there with these other students is difficult. She is confronted with a limit situation, where the behaviour of others appears both intentional and purposeful. I enquire as to how she came to know this one particular student to whom she seemed to referring as the source of her discontent. The client said that, 'they used to talk a lot at secondary school, and that she couldn't understand why he was behaving in this way to her when they use to be such good friends'.

The historical context of being is introduced because the subjects of our attention have prior experience of each. Prior to our encounters, the student had relatively good relations with the object of her discontent. However, now we have a limit situation that has arisen in the environment that is the College, and it is a limit situation because the student's actions-in-world are limited by her presence in it. The situation has arisen with her peers, one of whom is known to the client. The client says that her experience of being with this particular group of students affects her in a negative way, and that this is due to an awareness of difference in her experience of being with one particular student in time and place. The client suggests that in spite of her efforts to find out 'why' this group of students are treating her this way, she is powerlessness to effect change (Hoogendijk, 1988), and she goes on to suggest that the situation is not likely to improve in the short or medium term. Here, the student has created for herself a situation of dread as she projects herself into the future. She fears the future, and what it might hold for her, and in an attempt avoid this prospective experience or potential nothingness, she has sought help and support from me (Sartre, 1943/1958).

This for me provides the perfect opportunity to allow the student, who is my client, to think for herself, and to learn from her own experiences. Student counselling takes on educational role in that it allows students to review the prevailing situations in which they find themselves with the view of 'becoming' someone who will be better able to realise their own potential in a given context in time and place (Heidegger, 1927). So, to assume a position of powerlessness without considering all possible options denies the possibility that we ourselves may not be aware of all the possibilities that lay before us. During our counselling encounters, it might be possible for both the client and counsellor to look more closely at a situation or issue, and arrive at possibilities that neither the client, nor the counsellor, would have arrived at in isolation of each other (Buber, 1929/1947). However, as a student counsellor, I have been surprised by the extent to which different educational establishments seem to differ in the extent to which they appear to embrace the idea of learning how to cope with emotional distress through counselling and psychotherapy, and to view this process as part an integral part of the learning process for all students. This assumption is based on the assumption that learning about oneself in-relation with the world-around must surely prove beneficial to society as a whole; not least of all, because it allows to young people to know that it is alright to seek help and support in situations where they themselves can see no way through their distress.

In my deliberations, I am reminded Ogbu (1978) of the education system and its tendency to maintain the status quo. By denying Black and Ethnic minority students' access to someone that could help them work through their emotional distress, the education system is in fact ensuring that Black and ethnic minorities never learn how to cope better with adversity they experience because of the ethnicity and culture. And of course, if Black and ethnic minority students never see adults who have benefited from academic success, or learned how to live as a Black or Ethnic minority person with Western society, they will conclude that there is no value in acquiring vocational or academic qualifications (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). Working in two different educational establishments at the same time, has given me as a counsellor the opportunity to gain some insight into the way different students experience 'being-there', phenomenologically; and the consequences that might have for the society as a whole.

In looking at the context within which this phenomenon reveals itself, I am aware that each College contained a significant number of students whose skin colour was not-White. At one College, I was able to work of students from both African and Afro-Caribbean backgrounds; and at the other College, the student body was mainly 'Bengali-speaking'. I use the term 'Bengali-speaking' as opposed to 'Asian' as I believe that the term 'Asian' does not clearly delineate this group of students, enough. Students herald from parts of the Indian subcontinent that speak Bengali, (i.e. Bangladesh, Gujarat, Bengal, etc.), as the main language, and as such there is a commonality of culture and ethnicity that appears to be communicated through their use of this language (Vygotsky, 1960). In deconstructing experience, the use of language reveals a way of seeing that appears peculiar to this group of students (Derrida, 1978; Lacan 1977)

There were both similarities and differences within and between both groups of students' experiences of being in College, but what struck me most were the similarities and differences between their experiences of being in College. In both Colleges, students' experience of *being-there* seemed to reflect the integrity of the organisation that provides their education; reinforcing the functionalist approach to education and the universal purpose of the College. Where the organisation seemed to be experiencing organisational difficulties, very similar difficulties seemed to be reflected in the students' perception of being-there. So, for instance, in one institution, students would complain about their experience of the College, (i.e. listing organisational or structural problems with which they found difficult to cope). These students, too, seemed to identify areas of their own personal life in-relation with they own families and friends, which they found difficult to cope. The College has become part of their lived-worlds, and the students seek to influence the College in ways that do not at first seem intentional; nor, purposeful. Concomitantly, the same students seek to effect change in the structure and organisation of their families, and/or friendships in ways, which do not seem intentional; or even purposeful, in the first instance. So, I ask myself the question, do those students who present for counselling with issues of marginalisation, isolation, or alienation reflect their experience of *being-there* in the College, and is that experience of *being-there* indicative of something with which the College itself grapples?

On observation, it would seem that many of the students seem to associate with those who are they believe are most like themselves. Students themselves have said during our encounters that they tended to associate with those who share the views on dress, music, television, gender, programmes, sport, etc, and can so do in a language that is, also, shared (Sherif et al, 1961). This social delineation seems quite marked in both Colleges where the majority of students are not-White. Students whose parentage, and heritage appear to be the same, tend to spend most of their time with each other. So, students whose parents appear to be working class, and who share a common language, are more likely to associate with each other than those who do not share the same socio-economic status, and/or language (Milner, 1972). Whilst everyone else seems to be left to make their own association as best, they can. I am reminded of Paul Gilbert's (1992, p471) evolution of powerlessness and prospect of immanent depression. To this end, I set this aside, and strive to discover for myself, meaning in all these subjective experiences.

Students left to make their own way in College seem to be either: (a) isolated and marginalised by the College; students being a component part of the College; or, (b) they isolate and marginalise themselves in-relation to factors about which they say they are powerless to control, or influence. Exploring this experience in-relation with individual students or groups of students seems important where the majority of the student body present a dominant culture within the College that is not shared by minority groupings.

So, black students of Afro-Caribbean origin seemed to share a view of their own existence that appeared to be very similar to that experienced by White students whose parents were of similar socio-economic status. All students' talk about having gone to the same secondary schools, living in similar housing accommodation, and spoke using a language of shared meaning for themselves as a group. The kinds of personal problems that were described and clarified within our therapeutic encounters did not appear to vary, significantly, between these groups of students. But, I did find that a number of students of African origin, who expressed concerns *being-there* in-relation with both black students of Afro-Caribbean origin, and White counterparts, also expressed concerns about feeling isolated and alienated as a consequence of what they seemed to perceived to be 'cultural differences'. Clearly, this aspect of being-in-the-world, (i.e. that of social comparison) (Festinger et al, 1950), needed further investigation as social comparison seemed to be important for students and seemed to give rise to many of the difficulties students experienced whilst at College and out side of it.

Here, I am reminded of Locke's (1975) comments on the importance cultural difference in the process of human understanding. Culture it would seem poses a number of possibilities and limitations, which may or may not be realised by individual students. So, students of African origin seemed to associate together according to shared language and/or country of origin in much the same way as 'Bengali-speaking' students seemed to do; irrespective of skin colour. However, the only significant difference that revealed itself to during my encounters between the students of African origin and 'Bengali-speaking' peoples, and those students of Afro-Caribbean origin and white counterparts, was their response to the familial expectation - that they should do well as students. By this, I mean that the kinds of issues raised were very similar, and the extent to which such issues could affect their ability to study did not appear to be significantly different. And yet, these groups of students seemed to know very little about each other, and did not socialise to any great extent: not even, in the classroom.

Personally, I was struck by the way students whose parents were from Africa or the 'Middle East' described their experience of *being-there* at both secondary school, and the College. Many students who spoke as if they had not been born in the UK, but who dressed differently from the majority of other students, often described their experience of being-there at College as 'a marginalising experience'. These students would talk about not being invited to participate in the activities of some students. These students seemed to prefer to associate only with those who appeared to speak their language, or practice the same religion, and reflect their experience of being ignored both inside and outside of the classroom. Students spoke about the way the world affected them as something done unto them, and about which they had no control (Sartre, 1955). I might illustrate this sense of marginalisation by referring to one student of Yemeni origin who spoke about the way both Black and white students at school would make fun of the shape of his head (see Appendix A).

This student had had described to me in great detail the incident in which he had incurred the physical damage to his head. He described how he had tolerated the insults, the harassment, the jeering

all through secondary school. He described how, both he and his older brother, had developed a mental illness that was diagnosed, and treated at secondary school; and how, when he remembered to, he continued to take the medication prescribed whilst at College. Most pertinent to us both, seemed to be the possibility that in spite of all this toleration on his part, he still felt ostracised; alienated and isolated at College in ways which that he appeared powerless to effect change. Gilbert (1992) describes this kind of personality as one that strives to express itself, but any inhibition of this motivation tends to feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, and depression. He, also, described how; even now at College, he could not speak openly about his experience of terrorist activity in his own country, and how he had incurred the damage to his embodied self in this way.

You could argue that those who would harass, and torment this student were not familiar with the means by which this particular student had acquired the head injuries. Why should they know? But that isn't important. What seemed to be important to both student, and subsequently, myself was the feeling of being isolated and alienated as a result of something over which he had had no control, and about which, he could have done nothing. The client's physical and cultural differences seemed to invite persecution, and yet he was not responsible for the presence of these differences, nor was he able to confront the world-around without wanting to disengage from it. Being-there for this person continued to be most difficult. His physicality seemed to stand in the way of true authentic communication with his peers in ways which he felt that he was powerless to change. The anxiety and despair that he experienced in-relation with his peers; when projected into the future turned to despair, despair which had resulted in his being referred to a psychiatrist under whose care he has been since the age of eleven.

This experience of powerlessness in-relation with the world-around, seems to be reflected in the life stories of many students who present for counselling. Even when I visited tutorial groups to identify, clarify, and describe; an as yet undetermined issue or concern, students of all denominations seem to speak in ways that reflected their powerlessness in-relation to, and with, their lived-worlds. On a physical level, students would speak about the sense of powerlessness they felt in-relation with the organisation, (i.e. organisational difficulties with staffing, room allocation, lack of information from the College, etc). On a social level, they would talk about the way their academic time-tables conflicted with their social lives, and the way they were powerless to change the time-table to fit around their social lives. On a personal level, students would speak about the difficulty they experienced being with themselves. The uncertainty of being confronted with someone else's view of oneself and wondering how s/he might come to such a viewpoint which appears to differ so greatly from one's own continues to invoke anxiety and the desire to hide within oneself (Kierkegaard (1843/1954). On a spiritual level, students would speak about the relation with the 'ideals' that they hold, and the emotional difficulty they might experience in finding that other students may never share the same views about the world. I might illustrate this last point by referring to another client of mine.

This client is Bengali-speaking young man. Born in Bangladesh, but came to England when he was very young. He went to secondary school in England, and was not doing a course at College with the view to going onto University, eventually. This student presented for counselling having experienced what he described as ‘an unprovoked physical assault whilst on the way to College’. The client reported the incident to the police, but had heard nothing further. He had taken some time off College because of the incident, and his tutor had advised him to seek counselling when he did return.

Since, then we have moved on to talk about his experience of being with his peers at College, and his friends where he lives. He refers to his friends where he lives as the ‘area boys’. Both groups of friends are Bengali-speaking, and he does not associate with boys from different culture or ethnic backgrounds. This client seems to be faced with a dilemma, which despite his efforts he seems unable to reconcile within himself, and in-relation with his friends. “Cultural shift” seems to have resulted in his friends not acting like ‘good Muslims’. By this, I mean his friends seem to engage in a lot of activities that would be frowned upon by the elders of the client’s community. The significance of this is that the client’s own father is well respected in the local mosque and the client fears that stories of his activities will get back to his parents and they will disapprove. He says:

‘My parents don’t want me to hang around with the ‘bad boys’....it would be good if they went to the mosque to ask Allah’s forgiveness, but all they want to do is smoke, play pool, and drive cars...I cant get them to go to the mosque...I have tried asking them to come smoke a cigarette behind the mosque, hoping that when they have finished they might go in to pray, but they wont.....some will say that they will come to ‘Jummah’ on Friday at College but they never come.....’

In this discourse you can hear how the student struggles with what he believes his parents would want him to be, and what his friends prefer to be. This is an ongoing discussion in which he would find difficult to engage outside of the counselling session. He has a different way of being that appears to be dependent, which group of people he is with. His identity is grounded in heritage: a culture based on religion (Natanson, 1981). He seems reluctant to give this heritage up for fear of losing his identity in the process. He searches for the middle ground, by inviting his friends to participating in their cultural heritage. They have refused; and yet, he continues to be confronted with different ways of being in the course of his everyday life in which seem dependent on him giving up his heritage, and his religion. He is, clearly, reluctant to do so, and this battle is seems to be reflected in the descriptions of his everyday experiences during our encounters (Jaspers, 1968).

Such factors are important because they reflect the students experience *being-there* in a particular stated context. Mostly, students seem to speak about the way the world-around has affected their ability to take action-in-the-world in a negative way. Re-interpreting this experience such that students become placed firmly at the centre of their experiences can be very difficult to hear: for not only the student, but also the counsellor. But, such an approach could offer the student the opportunity

to re-construct his/her lived-world in a way where s/he is not always the victim of somebody else's actions-in-the-world. By this I mean that, the powerlessness becomes a property of the circumstances or context in which the students find themselves, and not directly attributable to the students themselves.

So, in-relation with those students who presented with issues arising out of organisational constraints for instance, together we could explore their experience of being in College, itself. We could come to see the College as being an organisational structure that appeared to be experiencing the same constraints as the students themselves. And like the students, the College seemed helpless to effect change in a positive way. (I consider the organisation to be 'a living breathing structure' in that it 'lives and dies'; and not, merely as 'an inanimate object'). The moral question as to whether any of this was 'good', and 'right' was not entered into; suffice to say that it seemed to be a shared experience rather than merely one where the students felt, persecuted.

The students spoke as if they intended to then, persecute, the institution by raising complaints with the College; and I must admit, it would have been my duty as College counsellor to help and support the students in so doing. However, such procedures would have been futile in this instance, and the College's limitations in this matter had been reached. They could not provide any more resources, for a number of reasons, which I have no desire to go in to here. Suffice to say that I acted with intention and purpose in asking these groups of students to consider the possibilities for themselves in-relation with myself. If, these were the prevailing circumstances, and they had experienced emotional difficulties as consequences of these prevailing circumstances, what did they think/feel was possible, and what did not? Here, emphasis has been changed from one where the College is being asked to change the students' experience of *being-there*, to one where the students are being asked to consider how they themselves might change their experience of being-there.

I speak now as if I am an innocent bystander in this process, but really, I should include myself in the group's deliberations. I am indeed an integral part of any decision-making that takes place during this time, and will almost certainly contribute to any discussion on students' possible actions in the world, thereafter, simply by my being-there. I must accept this responsibility, or remove myself from the discussion. It transpired that the students could do much to change their experience of *being-there* without relying on the College to the same extent as they had done, previously. Together, we drew on our own personal resources, and decided that we take a much more proactive role in the learning process as a group: rather than assume the position of powerlessness in-relation with the College.

So far, I have spoken about powerlessness as, if, it were a problem; a presenting issue, about which there were moral implications. I know not whether being powerless is a 'good' or a 'bad' way to be in the world, but this way of being-in-the-world does seem to invite particular responses on four dimensions of existence. I might refer to those students whose worldview is such that their experience of their lived-world is one of bullying and harassment. Some students accused of bullying seemed to think that their actions-in-the-world were 'funny'. 'We were only having a laugh', they say. But how is

it possible to view the same event in such very different ways? In-relation with the students, a number of different incidents involving different members of the groups of students, is explored. From such explorations, I point out the possibility that some of us, (i.e. we are in a group discussion), seem to find this way of being-in-the-world ‘funny’, whilst others of us seem to become so offended that we isolate and alienate ourselves in-relation with our peers. I say:

“Some students appear to have become victims of somebody else’s cruel behaviour, and in so doing, try very hard to avoid and escape from this behaviour. Some students have complained to the College, the College seems to have responded by victimising the whole group; and yet, there are some of us who are unchanged by this turn of events.”

I reiterate comments about the way security seem to be paying particular attention to the activities of the tutorial group as a whole. I point out the way in which some students appear to have shared experiences of other teachers and tutors. I reflect back to the group the way their relationship with the tutor, (i.e. who is always an integral part of any tutorial group), has deteriorated. And ‘how’ she, as an integral part of the tutorial group seems to have become victimised by the both the group and the College. Clearly, the College’s perception of the students has become such that it would seem to be very difficult to victimise one aspect of the group without the whole group becoming victimised by the College.

Again, the idea of powerlessness seems to have been transferred away from any one individual, to something that is shared in-relation with his/her lived-world. The group comes to ‘know’ itself as a living breathing entity; inextricable from each of its members until the group decides that it will no longer wishes to exist for itself. The group may choose to do this directly, or indirectly. However, the significance of each of its members plays a very big role in the perception of the group by the rest of the College. The tutorial group is as much in-relation with the College as each of its members. This takes on different significance when we consider the nature of that group. How many of this group does not originate from the UK? In Colleges where the population reflects the communities in which the College is situated, the groups’ experience of being-there can have important consequences for the College concerned.

Conclusions:

At the outset, I have argued that student counselling as an integral part of the learning process. I have attempted to demonstrate how this might be achieved drawing on my own understanding of the literature and my experience of *being-there* with students in College and hearing the life stories about how they too struggle with life’s everyday mysteries. This struggle does not appear to be experienced in the same way by everybody. Difference in life experiences, and ability to utilise our own personal resources, all contribute to our ability to grapple with these mysteries, constructively. All this ‘knowledge’ however is set aside during counselling until, such time as light is shed on the issue,

presented. To assume that I know enough about the way one particular student reflects the cultural diversity of the community to which we assume s/he belongs, invites interpretations which bear little reflection on what is happening from the student's own perspective. Most learning occurs when both the clients, and the counsellor, approach a presenting issue from a point of naivety. We both wait to see what materialises and bring to bear our understanding to the situation in ways, which will hopefully enable the student to cope better with this presenting issue. It seems most worthwhile to assume, nothing.

It appears that the very nature of the experience of different students within any given community, and within any given College, becomes persecutory on a number of different levels, (i.e. environmental, social, personal, and spiritual). Students' experience of being powerless to effect change in College, may be reflective of their experience of being powerless to effect change in relation with their families, and/or their friends. This may be reflective of existential guilt resulting in avoidance and escape from the responsibility goes with their freedom to be (Kierkegaard, 1900/1954; Sartre, 1956; Tillich, 1952). Students of African and Bengali Speaking origin seem to carry views on how they should relate to authority differently, to Black students of African Caribbean origin. However, being confronted with differing viewpoints within College can challenge such personal views and opinions, forcing some students to confront their existential angst as they consider redefining themselves in-relation with their peers, their families, and the College.

I assume that it is too difficult to hold both views within the same time and space without inviting loss of personal integrity (Davidson et al, 1989, p357). It is further argued that unless educational establishments' are prepared to acknowledge the way students compare their experiences of being-there with students within, and between other Colleges (Sartre 1945; Festinger et al, 1950), they can not appreciate the significance of their contribution to the process in which disaffected adolescents, become the disaffected adults of the future.

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