

Insights and Innovations in Community Mental Health

The Erich Lindemann Memorial Lectures

**organized and edited by
The Erich Lindemann Memorial Lecture Committee**

hosted by William James College



Foreward

The Erich Lindemann Memorial Lecture is a forum in which to address issues of community mental health, public health, and social policy. It is also a place to give a hearing to those working in these fields, and to encourage students and workers to pursue this perspective, even in times that do not emphasize the social and humane perspective. It's important that social and community psychiatry continue to be presented and encouraged to an audience increasingly unfamiliar with its origins and with Dr. Lindemann as a person. The lecturers and discussants have presented a wide range of clinical, policy, and historical topics that continue to have much to teach.

Here we make available lectures that were presented since 1988. They are still live issues that have not been solved or become less important. This teaches us the historical lesson that societal needs and problems are an existential part of the ongoing life of people, communities, and society. We adapt ways of coping with them that are more effective and more appropriate to changed circumstances—values, technology, and populations. The insights and suggested approaches are still appropriate and inspiring.

Another value of the Lectures is the process of addressing problems that they exemplify: A group agrees on the importance of an issue, seeks out those with experience, enthusiasm, and creativity, and brings them together to share their approaches and open themselves to cross-fertilization. This results in new ideas, approaches, and collaborations. It might be argued that this approach, characteristic of social psychiatry and community mental health, is more important for societal benefit than are specific new techniques.

We hope that readers will become interested, excited, and broadly educated. For a listing of all the Erich Lindemann Memorial Lectures, please visit www.williamjames.edu/lindemann.

The Erich Lindemann Memorial Lecture Committee presents

THE SEVENTH ANNUAL
ERICH LINDEMANN MEMORIAL LECTURE

Social Justice as a Mental State

Speaker

William Ryan, PhD: Professor of Psychology, Boston College

Moderator

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William Ryan, PhD

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On the one hand, Erich Lindemann was able to be sensitive to, to apprehend and be concerned about, the mental state, the emotional well-being, the anxieties of individual human beings (I think of all the individual human beings he ever came in contact with). And simultaneously, he was able to apprehend and be concerned about the societal environment in which those individual human beings were embedded and of which they were indissoluble parts.

Let me try to elaborate on this proposition, on this insight, this way of looking at the simultaneity of individuals and society. It has to do with the form of the linkage between individual persons and their society, which is inextricable: the two are part of one another, just as the fingers of a hand are part and parcel of the hand. One can think of different configurations of the fingers, palms and so forth, which will make the hand a hand of peace and friendship or form a fist, perhaps of hostility and destruction. The fingers are part of the fist or part of the reaching-out hand, and they are defined by it. It is this kind of simultaneous relationship that I want to try to focus on today.

Obviously, this insight was not Erich Lindemann's discovery, as he would be the first to say. It's an insight that has recurred time and time again over history and is shared by many persons. This insight into the nature of a relationship between the individual and society was really one of the key theorems in the whole body of thought and action that has come to be known as the community mental health movement.

When we were trying to formulate this relationship, twenty-five or thirty years ago, we were by and large focusing on some sort of definition by metaphor. We began with an awareness that the numbers of emotionally distressed persons in a population and their distribution was a highly significant characteristic of the community or the society. It was a defining characteristic. We began to seek for analogies and metaphors as ways of expressing this. One began to hear about, not sick individuals but a "sick society." In extreme cases, people would talk about the "insane society." This metaphorical line of thinking has continued to develop, but I think largely in a mechanistic and technocratic way. For example, we have heard about the "competent community;" and we still hear about something that's called the "delivery of services."

What are the comparisons here? What is a "competent community?" The comparison is perhaps to a competent individual or a well-functioning machine. "Delivery of services": what comparison is being made there? We deliver heating oil, we deliver milk, and so forth. This seems to imply that just as a community that delivers oil and milk and other commodities will be a community of comfortable, warm, well-fed

individuals, perhaps if we can learn to deliver human services effectively then we will have a comfortable population with respect to their social and psychological well-being.

It seems to me that developing this line of thought into such analogies really trivializes the basic idea. Furthermore, it distorts it, because there develops a dualistic implication - the notion that the community or the society and the individuals are two separate identities. From that point it degenerates into the rather vapid, well-worn vocabulary of interactionists - people interact with their environment, people are shaped by their society, and so forth. That's the wrong way to look at it. I don't think it's true that individuals interact with their society. The key truth is that individuals are their society. They are essentially the same thing. The configuration of all the multitudinous relationships among individuals is equivalent to the structure of society.

To take a homely example of this kind of relationship, think of a half-tone illustration in a newspaper. If you take a magnifying glass and look at it closely, what you'll see is an apparently random arrangement of little dots of various intensity. Then if you take the paper and hold it out at arm's length you'll see a picture of President Reagan. The dots are the picture.

Similarly with society. We all agree that our society is characterized by a class structure: there is a group of wealthy and powerful persons and there is a group of impoverished and powerless persons. The structure is there. It doesn't really matter which individuals are wealthy or which individuals are poor. It doesn't even matter which individuals are born and which ones die: the structure remains the same. The characteristic of being wealthy or being impoverished is determined by that structure and in turn determines that structure. Finally, this suggests that changes in the class structure are changes in the characteristics and particularly in the actions and in the relationships among the collectivity of persons who are equivalent to that society.

In trying to understand mental states, emotional or cognitive, of individual human beings in terms of the characteristics of the society of which they were an inextricable part, we were particularly concerned with characteristics that we tend to pull together under terms like social justice and social injustice. We were looking at the same thing through different ends of the telescope - through one end at the individual and through the other end at society. I think we had a half-formed intuition that, although we were looking at two very different levels, we were looking at two aspects of the same reality, so mental states and social justice in that sense can be thought of as an identity.

Now today I want to ask you to consider the same proposition, but with the terms reversed. Think about social justice in terms of mental states. Think of the idea that social justice is reflected in and measured by, and most importantly, is defined by mental states. There's an immediate problem there, namely, the degree to which we are able to understand or at least recognize mental states and processes. We can arrive at a good

deal of agreement when we observe and identify mental states. We're able to find people who will agree with us that this person is happy, that one is sad; this person's thinking is realistic, that one's is unrealistic; this person is assertive, that one is passive; this one is autonomous, independent, that one is suggestible, easily led. Now we are able to recognize this and agree on it to a large extent because we share certain kinds of assumptions and values. We share the norms by which we make these judgments, norms which are determined by our position in society and by the structure of society.

Consider the possibility that we turn for agreement to someone from a somewhat different society. We would then have a somewhat different set of norms and values and would look at things somewhat differently. Asked to concur, he would say, "No, no, you've got it all wrong. The person you call happy is frivolous and the person you call sad is serious." Immediately, it seems to me, we have an apprehension of what his society is like; we know something about it from this slight manifestation. We can say, "this is a realistic person; that one is unrealistic." He could reply, "No, no. The person you are calling realistic we call tough and pitiless, while the unrealistic person is a compassionate one." Similarly, he might call the assertive person aggressive and hostile, and the passive one, friendly and accommodating. Our independent-minded one is seen as self-centered and competitive, while the person who is group-minded and easily-led becomes "cooperative and concerned about other persons."

What I am trying to suggest is that these different sets of assumptions that we're working on, these different sets of convictions, of beliefs about the basic nature of human beings and society, reflect differences in the social structure in which we are embedded; and in turn, the social structure determines these different assumptions. As long as the person from a different society stays out of the picture, we are able to fairly well agree on the recognition of certain kinds of mental states.

What about social justice? How do we go about understanding that? How would we know social justice if we saw it? How would we experience it? There is not a similar degree of agreement in our society on that question. We tend to break down and disagree. Let me give you a few specifics. We confront the fact that there are a few persons in our society who have enormous amounts of resources, and many others who have essentially nothing. That fact is acknowledged by everyone. But then the question arises, "Is that fair? Is that a just state of affairs? Does that characterize a just society? Many would say "No. One can think of no reason why one should have a thousand times more than another." Then others would say "Yes, that's a just society."

Similarly, there are opposing opinions on how to achieve a just society. A common proposition is, "Hard work will pay off if you have faith in yourself and stick to it." That's a proposition with which the majority of persons would agree. When it comes to public policy, there's the proposition, "the government should take steps to assure that every

person who wants to work will have a decent job." Some will say yes and some will say no. If we run through a list of these kinds of propositions and look at the yes and no answers, we see that there emerges two very different and opposing senses of what is social justice. These contradictory definitions are represented in mental processes. They are determined by very basic assumptions that we hold; very basic convictions. How do we go about understanding them?

Let me give another example, drawing on issues raised in the Reagan-McGovern U.S. presidential election campaign. The opposition keeps raising the issue of fairness. People say the Reagan administration is unfair— it favors the rich at the expense of the rest of us. Does this mean that Reagan is an evil and malevolent person, trying to do us in? I don't think that's true; I think that in pursuing the activities that result in a state of affairs that some of us call unfair, Reagan believes he's pursuing social justice. I recall listening to a press conference in which someone was raising this issue of the rich getting richer and the rest of us getting poorer. Reagan very clearly expressed his unquestioned conviction when he responded that the main thing we should learn from this, and what we should glory in, is that America is a place where individuals can get rich. So he is trying to shape and influence a state of affairs which he regards as just to the extent that individuals can get rich. Anything that stands in the way of that, such as taxation, safety inspectors going into factories, etc. is unjust. It goes against the order of things; that's not the way God created America. That's his assumption. As he sees things moving in that direction, he experiences a sense of social justice. There's a congruence between the assumptions he holds in his mind and the reality he perceives around him.

So when we ask the question, "What is social justice?" we are really asking about mental states; about the contradictory sets of assumptions people hold about human nature and human society. One example: we look at the issue of racial and sex discrimination. We decide something should be done about it, and develop Affirmative Action programs, based on an idea that is congruent with one set of perceptions and assumptions. But then there is another whole group of people who become alarmed and say, "That's unjust! That's reverse discrimination." They talk about quotas as being un-American; they hold that the only legitimate way of curing discrimination is to guarantee that the principle of individual advancement by individual merit is maintained. Now the other side will say, "That's silly. No one gets discriminated against as an individual, but as a member of a collectivity, a member of some group in society. Changes in the structure of a work force, of a college faculty, for example, if they are to mean anything with respect to Affirmative Action, mean changes in numbers, changes in the distribution of persons in sub-groups." This fight goes on forever, because the protagonists are operating on different assumptions about the way the world is and the way it should be.

A more general example involves varying definitions of what equality means in the United States today. The prevailing view is that equality should mean simple equality of opportunity. Individuals should be free to pursue their own happiness; to use their unique characteristics to advance as far as they can. An opposing, but minority, view says, "No. Equality has to be thought of in terms of the distribution of resources in the whole society, and ultimately, in terms of equality of access to those resources."

What are the underlying mental states in these two contrary visions? There are, I think, at least three dimensions that one can focus on to help us understand this. One can think of answers to three questions. One question is: Should we pay most attention to, account for things in terms of, individual human beings, or is it more important to make judgments in terms of larger groupings— faculties, neighborhoods, communities, society, etc. That is, are human beings primarily individual, or are they primarily members of social groups?

The second dimension is, How important are the differences between them? There are thousands of differences we can identify: some of us are tall, some are short; some people are smarter than others, some can run faster, and so forth. The opposite perspective says, "Yes, there are very interesting differences; that's one of the things that makes life interesting. People are not quite the same. But by and large, they are pretty similar."

Finally, we ask the question, What is the source of human behavior? Some will say, "It's inside the person - intelligence, personality characteristics, will power, etc." Others will say, "No. Most of what we do is pretty much determined by what we are running up against on the outside."

If you take these three questions and put them together, and then go back to the issues of Affirmative Action, and equality in general, the person who believes that the playing out of internal differences among individuals is what life is all about will argue against Affirmative Action, calling it reverse discrimination, and will argue that equality means only equality of opportunity for individuals.

Thus our mental state determines the extent to which we are comfortable with the way things are going in the society around us, and we have these two opposing senses, these two opposing experiences, of what is just and what is unjust.

Now where do you go from there? Do you say, "O.K.; one person says this, one person says that. They are equally acceptable."? I'm reminded of a story about two men who were engaged in a long dispute over many years. Finally they decided to bring their case to the rabbi and let him decide. The rabbi agreed; he interrupted his discussions with his students and listened to the arguments. The first man presented his case with dignity and his sense of the injustice of the matter, and concluded, "That's my case." The rabbi said, "You are right." Then he turned to the second man, who presented an equally

outrageous version of what had happened. When he was finished, the rabbi again said, "You are right." One of the students jumped up and protested, "But Rabbi, how can both of these people be right?" The rabbi said, "You are also right."

So what do we learn from this? Sure, at one level we can say, "Yes, you are right, based upon your own set of assumptions; and you too have a set of assumptions, that fit or don't fit." But both can't be right. There is such a thing as objective reality. We don't go simply by what goes on in our mind, just as in clinical work we don't say it doesn't matter whether I stand here and say I am Bill Ryan or Napoleon. It matters. I'm not Napoleon; and if I think I am, or I hear voices when there's no one there, we don't accept that as reality. So even though a person's conviction that human beings are involved in the playing out of internal individual differences may fit with his perception of the way things are, it may be wrong.

I would suggest today that this dominant assumption -- these assumptions characteristic of the majority of persons in our society with respect to the signal importance of the individual, the importance of differences and uniqueness, the importance of internal characteristics -- that these are wrong. This distorts reality.

When we try to look at objective reality, it is not true that we are simply millions of autonomous, disconnected individuals. None of us could live that way. None of us could live for a week if we didn't depend utterly and completely upon thousands or perhaps millions of others around us. Our society is not one of a number of lone cow hands running around autonomously; it's a very interdependent, linked-together society; and it's very easy to demonstrate that. Try to think of living for even a few days as a completely autonomous individual. And it's not particularly true that the major thing about human beings is how different they are from each other. The only reason we're interested in these little differences is because in most ways we're very similar to one another. It is certainly not true that we can explain what happens in life purely in terms of internal characteristics. For every smart, thrifty, ambitious millionaire there are thousands of smart, thrifty, ambitious paupers. It's not the internal characteristics but the external circumstances that determines it. So the idea of playing out internal individual differences is neither accurate in its perception of reality nor does it produce a correct mental representation of social justice.

We come to the age-old question: What is to be done? Obviously, those of us who are interested in what I call the minority view of social justice want things to change. We want the mental representations that lead to comfort with the unjust state of affairs to change, and we want the state of affairs to change; and we recognize that both changes have to be more or less simultaneous.

How is this change supposed to come about? I'm not at all sure - if I knew, I would not keep it a secret. But I think I have some beginning suggestions. I think there is a

role here, as there is in psychotherapy, for interpretation. We have this set of assumptions, this mental representation of human beings and how they function, as a result, to a large extent, of how our experiences have been interpreted to us and have been reinforced.

Think, for example, of the experience of school. The processes that go on in the classroom have to do with sorting out individuals. They try to determine who reads best, who spells best, who knows more, and so forth. The whole process is a process of setting thirty or forty kids in competition with one another to sort out who is going to be defined as the best, who is going to be told that his internal characteristics are dramatically different from those of the rest of the people, and that he is superior. We get accustomed to this view of society—of everyone being in competition with one another. Matthew Dumont has a marvelous metaphor for this when he talks about American society as a demolition derby—everyone trying to knock each other to pieces. This all gets interpreted to us in such a way that we tend to accept this false view of reality. So it has to be re-interpreted.

The second point is that I have become persuaded that there is a particular link between mental states and certain kinds of collective action. Let me refer for a moment to some research that has recently been completed by a colleague of mine at Boston College, Brinton Lykes. She was working on identifying and measuring something very similar to what I've been talking about, which she put in terms of contrasting conceptualizations of the self. She was able to show that

one can divide people in terms of a self-concept of autonomous individualism or one of social individuality. She found that those more likely to view the self in terms of this indissoluble linkage of the individual and the society of which he or she is a part, were, first of all, those who are lowest on the occupational ladder—persons who hold service and manual positions. Women were more likely than men to go in this direction. And finally, the crucial thing was that those who demonstrated this conception of the self and social individuality were much more involved as members of a collective action for social change.

Now it remains to be worked out what the causal relationships are. But this suggests that this is moving in the right direction. What is to be done depends to some extent on which level you are working. At the level of the individual mental state there is a tremendous amount of re-interpretation to be done. At the level of society, there is required a tremendous amount of collective action for social change.

Now, that's not carrying us very far. I'm sorry to say that beyond that, I don't have any further recipe for perfection and justice. Somehow or other, I do feel confident that we can change, that we can achieve a just society. Somehow or other we can arrive at a society in which we don't exalt the individual as some kind of autonomous, independent,

omnipotent being. Then we would accept the fact that almost everything we do we do together. Most of the accomplishments of human beings are things that people do together. We wouldn't focus on these minor differences amongst us. We'd recognize that we're all children of God and essentially similar to one another - not in Schiller's words that all men will become brothers, but rather that we are brothers and sisters now, in our time, in our place.

The wonders of man's internalizing, his intellectual capacities, his creativity, his imagination, his will, his determination -- all these things are only meaningful in terms of what we do with them in relation to the outside world. I do believe that we can teach each other; that we can learn to share these capacities, and arrive at a situation in which we would feel that our ideas and the world fit together, and we could say that this is a just world.

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