



ALL POLITICS IS LOCO

Are the problems of society driving you crazy? Therapists are finding that becoming your brother's keeper may be more helpful than blaming your mother. BY PYTHIA PEAY



can't stop thinking about their faces," says a distraught 44-year-old woman to her therapist as her weekly session begins. "This morning, I passed a homeless woman and her daughter on the street. Where will they go? What if someone steals the money I gave them?"

It is a delicate moment in the journey of a patient who has struggled with depression for more than a year. Rather than steer his client away from the outer world of social suffering toward the innerscape of family complexes, as some more conventionally minded psychotherapists might have done, psychologist Lane Gerber of Seattle University encourages his client, Ms. X, to confront her feelings of urgent concern.

"Tell me some more about this encounter," Gerber says. "It seems like this woman really touched you."

Abruptly, however, Gerber's client tacks sharply in a different direction. "I don't know why I'm thinking about this in the first place," says Ms. X. "She's not the first homeless person I ever saw. Even though that sounds awful, it's not why I'm coming to talk to you. The purpose of therapy is to talk about my personal problems."

But Gerber keeps the dialogue focused on the turbulent feelings the chance street encounter has stirred up in his client. He explains that he considers her strong reaction to be just as psychologically mean-

ingful as any emotional responses she might have had to her parents or her children. Taken aback, Ms. X comments that she had never thought of things that way—there was the outside world, and then there was her and her family.

During subsequent sessions, a dancelike two-step unfolds between Ms. X's personal world and the political sphere. Gerber points out to his client the parallel between her frustration that no one ever listens to her and the invisibility of the homeless woman. Instead of just highlighting the symbolic similarities between his client and the homeless woman, however, Gerber says he also gives equal weight to Ms. X's passion for the plight of the homeless. This twin perspective helps bridge the gap between his client's inner world and the wider role she must play as a citizen. Indeed, over time, Gerber says, his client not only finds her individual voice but becomes a vocal community activist for homeless people in her town.

Gerber's account of his client's eventual triumph over depression is not psychology as usual. Most people, including professional psychologists, believe that sociopolitical concerns should be checked at a therapist's door. As one woman says, "Why should I spend \$100 an hour discussing welfare reform?"

Nonetheless, like Gerber, a growing number of "political psychologists" are challenging

Even in the world of traditional therapy, political problems are making their way to the couch.



the segregation between patients' private conflicts and those of the larger world. Such an artificial division, they believe, may even contribute to feelings of loneliness and alienation—the very problems therapy so often seeks to cure. In a world beset by the collective traumas of environmental destruction, ethnic strife, and economic globalization, the notion that personal suffering is related only to one's childhood can seem naive.

Politics and psychology may seem to be an unconventional mix. But experts like psychologist Stephen Kull of Washington, D.C., say that political psychology is a "significant and advanced field" that has existed for more than 40 years.

Following World War II, Kull notes, numerous studies examined the origins of prejudice and its relation to the "authoritarian personality." Politics and psychology converged once again at the height of the feminist and civil rights movements, when individual problems were seen to be not merely personal in origin but deeply embedded in the values of the surrounding culture. Today, a growing cadre of political psychologists are applying their knowledge to contemporary societal issues.

Although the practice of applying psychological perspectives to the political process has

author of *The Political Psyche* (Routledge), says he first initiated a change in the way he himself practices psychotherapy. He noticed more patients bringing in war-inspired dreams, fantasies, and visceral reactions like disgust or fear. While some clients were using Saddam Hussein as a means to talk about their father, he says, just as many "were talking about their father when what they really wanted to talk about was Saddam Hussein. So it wasn't just that the external world was a way into the internal world but that the traditional stuff of therapy was masking the attempt to talk about outer-world issues."

Over time, Samuels became increasingly aware of the extent to which large-scale political events have had a dramatic impact on his clients' inner lives. Within recent memory, the Holocaust, the Oklahoma City bombing, and even the death of Princess Diana have taught us that human beings are not shaped only by their parents or early-childhood traumas but by the epic triumphs and tragedies of their particular historical era.

As obvious as this idea might be to a historian, for a therapist it was a fairly novel concept—and one that led Samuels to a startling conclusion: That in citizens' subjective responses to worldwide events lay the miss-

"political energy flowed through the veins of human beings."

To Samuels and other political psychologists, it became increasingly apparent that people suffered as much from an inability to find their role in the larger body politic as from any other personal problems. Asking the same kinds of questions therapists typically use to deepen their patients' self-knowledge, but with an eye to the political—such as "What was your first political memory?" or "How did your family history shape your political perspective?"—was one way, they discovered, that individuals could begin to liberate their innate political instincts.

Overcoming passivity in order to effect change in one's life and the surrounding world, says Diane Perlman, a clinical psychologist in Philadelphia, has proved to be a key component in maintaining both psychological and physical health. According to Perlman, studies show that conditions of helplessness may suppress the immune system. Among cancer patients, for example, those who do best take an activist approach to their illness; and children who suffered from fears of nuclear attack felt better after writing letters to the president and to Congress. Perlman posits that just as we have a sex drive, or libido, so too is there a drive for truth and justice—what she has termed *verido*.

"It's shocking," Kull says, "how powerful people really are. Just a dozen letters to policymakers on an issue is a really big deal." Yet in focus groups and polls, Kull says he has found that voters overwhelmingly feel that "people like me don't matter..." They feel like they don't have a voice, and they get frustrated because they don't think their values are helping to shape the political process."

Hopefully, as more psychotherapists turn their skills to healing the split between citizens and the political sphere, they will not only empower their clients but also help to heal the ailing body politic. **□**

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been around for some time, Kull says that "dealing with political issues in a psychological context is less developed as a field." Andrew Samuels, a professor of analytical psychology at the University of Essex in England, concurs: "The way we [psychologists] were all trained is that if the client talks about the famine in Africa, you're supposed to explore the depriving, absent breast—or something like that."

It was during the Persian Gulf War that Samuels, who is the

ing link that could restore their broken connection to the larger world of politics. As Samuels shifted his focus in the way he listened to his clients—honoring, rather than dismissing, their gut-level reactions to public crises—he also began to notice that they would "reveal their most passionate political convictions that they'd held for a long time but were like guilty secrets." He theorized that in addition to sexual, moral, intellectual, and spiritual energy,