From individuality to individualism: A critique of the helping

Timothy B. Smith  
*Brigham Young University, tbs@byu.edu*

Matthew R. Draper  
*Brigham Young University - Provo*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub)

Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub)

**Original Publication Citation**

**BYU ScholarsArchive Citation**
Smith, Timothy B. and Draper, Matthew R., "From individuality to individualism: A critique of the helping" (2003). *All Faculty Publications*. 3143.  
[https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/3143](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/3143)

From the Individual to Individualism:

A Critique of the Helping Professions

Timothy B. Smith

Matthew R. Draper

Brigham Young University

*Timothy B. Smith PhD is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Brigham Young University. Matthew R. Draper is an intern at the Counseling and Career Center of Brigham Young University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Tim Smith PhD, Dept. of Counseling Psychology, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602. e-mail: <tbsmith@byu.edu>
Abstract

Individualistic values characterize contemporary society and many popular approaches to mental health treatment. This paper critiques the individualistic values embedded in the helping professions that implicitly contradict the teachings of Jesus Christ, the surest foundation for mental health interventions. Members of AMCAP are encouraged to search out and replace other problematic values that contradict gospel teachings but that have been integrated into contemporary mental health practice.
From the Individual to Individualism:

A Critique of the Helping Professions

*We in America have become a society devoted to the individual self. . . . Rarely does [therapy] speak of duty to one’s society---almost everyone in psychotherapy is concerned with individual gain, and the psychotherapist is hired to assist in this endeavor. (Rollo May)*

Elder Richard G. Scott (1998) has emphasized the need to evaluate traditions and practices associated with our cultural heritage against the standards taught in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though obviously different from the social diversity to which Elder Scott referred, the general traditions and practices of the helping professions may be said to reflect the “cultural heritage” of training institutions steeped in the history of social science. Applying Elder Scott’s admonition to the “culture” of the helping professions, this paper will address only one aspect of the current culture of therapy, individualism, in light of both scriptural evidence and modern critics of psychology. Hopefully the reader will proceed to evaluate additional assumptions or perspectives of the field that may also contradict gospel teachings.

From the Study of the Individual to the Propagation of Individualism

The scientific study of the individual was legitimized through the work of the founders of psychology and other helping professions. Indeed, the uniqueness of nineteenth century psychology was not so much its content as its approach to the subject. Psychologists attempted to objectively study the individual--particularly the individual in contrast to the group. The aims of objectivity and experimental control seem to have been worthwhile goals, giving rise to many notable findings across the decades. But in
Individualism

addition to increasing the precision of study of human behavior, the exclusive focus on
the individual that psychology advocated reinforced and solidified individualistic values
already characteristic of Western society. Thus psychology has had an interactive
relationship with the social moral and ethical systems of society.

Individualistic values reflect the tenor of our modern age. Some authors have
even gone so far as to call individualism a “disguised ideology” in psychology and
psychotherapy (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). A great deal of psychotherapy
practice assumes the appropriateness of the individualistic ethic, and promotes
individualism as an ideal both explicitly and implicitly. The exclusive focus on the
individual in psychology, however, has two consequences. First, such a focus limits the
utility of the resulting theories and research findings for practice in the mental health
professions because it does not take into account the interactive and contextual nature of
human nature and well-being. Second, an individualistic focus may also perpetuate
problematic ethical and moral positions that may be contrary to the moral systems and
practices of many clients as well as the teachings of Jesus Christ.

The focus on individual happiness to the exclusion of other ideals arises due to the
subtly held belief that “the basic unit of human reality is the individual person, who is
assumed to exist and have determinate characteristics prior to, and independent of, his or
her social existence” (Richardson & Zeddies, 2001, p. 5). One of the effects of this view
is a sharp belief between public and private domains, and a lack of moral understanding
beyond the individual’s desires (Bellah et. al, 1985). An example of this is the oft-heard
refrain “What I do behind closed doors is my business.” Even marriage can fall victim to
this process, with some individuals assuming that marriage is only about whether or not
their spouse or the relationship makes them happy, completely overlooking the broader moral issue of responsibility to others and coping during difficult times.

In some ways our modern society has tempered such sharp individualism by adding a deeply held doctrine that people are inherently worthwhile, with certain undeniable and unalienable rights that should not be violated by others. This modern understanding of individualism is called “liberal individualism” (Sandel, 1996). Liberal individualism adds an element of respect and dignity to the rights of all, arguing that it is important to not intrude on the rights of others. An example of this might be a teenager’s attitude of “I should be able to do what I want if I’m not going to hurt anybody.” This combination of self-interest and respect for the rights of others results in reluctance for anyone to proclaim the superiority or inferiority of various ways of life, in order to best protect the rights of others. Psychotherapy, in an interesting way, also participates in this process. A good deal of behavior that psychotherapists see or hear about in their practices could be considered problematic if not blatantly immoral by those holding traditional values. Yet rather than discussing behavior such as promiscuity, homosexuality, abortion in moral terms, psychologists tend to label them in terms of “healthy” or “unhealthy” depending on the political climate of the time (Fancher, 1995). In accordance to our modern political culture, many issues that were formerly pathologized are now no longer considered problematic, often under the individualistic assumption that what one does behind closed doors is nobody else’s business. The practice of psychotherapy has followed this individualistic and morally ambiguous trend, seeking to help people become free from constraint and obstacles to happiness, both internal and external. Our training emphasizes that we do what we can to remove the causes of discomfort or unhappiness so that the “self” of our clients might function or feel better.
Paul Vitz, one critic of this trend in psychotherapy (1994), calls this preoccupation with the self “selfism.” He quotes Herbert Hendin (1975) from his book *The Age of Sensation* to describe one aspect of selfism:

This culture is marked by a self-interest and egocentrism that increasingly reduces all relations to the question: What am I getting out of it? . . . Society’s fascination with self-aggrandizement makes many young people judge all relationships in terms of winning and losing points. For both sexes in this society, caring deeply for anyone is becoming synonymous with losing. Men seem to want to give women less and less, while women increasingly see demands men make as inherently demeaning.

The most worthwhile goal in our modern society is providing for individualistic needs and wants without looking to greater social or moral obligations. Even familial and marital relationships are understood in terms of what happiness they can provide for the self, eroding the traditional values of self-sacrifice, self-control and duty to others necessary for strong marriages and healthy families (Vitz, 1994).

The clash between the moral practices of clients and the assumptions of psychotherapy, however, is pervasive and can take forms ranging from obvious to subtle. For example, both social constructivism and positivism (philosophies of science) deny the possibility of universal principles of morality.\(^1\) This shift away from universal ethics may be noted in the widespread “value neutral” stance taken by mental health professionals\(^2\) on issues such as homosexuality and abortion. Thus, more often than not, individual morality and individualism, with their more popular synonyms of self-appreciation and self-acceptance, characterize mental health practice—as well as the progressively disconnected social fabric of this country. As one professional has noted,
“Therapists since the time of Freud have overemphasized individual self-interest, giving short shrift to family and community responsibilities” (Doherty, 1995, p. 7). Such psychotherapy is “self-ish” and unlikely to aid client who value the importance of family, community, and moral responsibility to others.

Due to the potential clash between non-individualistic beliefs held by some clients and the individualistic ideology of many therapy theories, therapists need to be very careful in their interventions. Psychotherapy, holding the values of personal fulfillment, freedom from misery, awareness and validation of one’s own feelings, can be very attractive to those who suffer, regardless of their backgrounds and beliefs (Richardson & Zeddies, 2001). However, by focusing exclusively on the feelings of the individual, and by focusing primarily on the issues of self-esteem and self-acceptance, the therapist may inadvertently perpetuate greater misery. The individual may begin to believe that they are at the center of their moral universe, and that if they were truly mentally healthy they would not suffer misery in life. This may build even greater grief and misery when the inevitable disappointments in life do occur. Traditional virtues that help people cope, such as “the redemptive power of suffering, acceptance of one’s lot in life, adherence to tradition, self-restraint and moderation” can become lost by the wayside in the face of individualism (Frank, 1978, pp. 6-7). Individualism does not offer an understanding to therapists or their clients about the ways in which society might perpetuate certain inevitable miseries, how they might better live up to their social and moral obligations, or how to fight for societal change rather than just individual happiness.

LDS Doctrine and Individualism

Steeped in the traditions of our training, we therapists may find it incomprehensible that the scriptures contain no references to self that support the use of
terms such as, self-esteem or self-appreciation. Although some might attribute this to differences between ancient and modern languages, a more likely alternative is that terms that particularly emphasize the self inaccurately depict the very nature of existence. We do not live in isolation from one another.

Rather, the scriptures repeatedly emphasize the connections and relationships we have with one another. Individualism of any form (pride, self-preoccupation, etc.) is always associated with unhappiness. This unhappiness is destined to grow in the last days as our culture’s intense preoccupation with the self also grows (Draper, 2001). Indulging in the wants and needs of the self, at first, breeds increased sensation and increased satisfaction. But over time, sensation alone only provides satisfaction for the body, while to the soul all seems senseless, leading to feelings of hopelessness and eventually nihilism. “When a people have drunk too deeply of the wine of selfishness, they care for nothing, not even themselves. They see no value in anything. In fact, they do not see at all; thus they cannot perceive the light as it pulsates through God’s people” (Draper, 2001, p. 36). Selfism (or selfishness) breeds iniquity like Christ’s love leads to service. Iniquity begets selfishness as selfishness begets iniquity in an ongoing (and destructive) feedback loop (Draper, 2001). People become increasingly closed off from others, focusing only on their own wants and desires, walking progressively away from the Gospel of Christ. Their relationships fragment, and they become increasingly isolated. In contrast, successful relationships are the hallmark of happiness because they increase our trust in others (faith), our vision of possibilities (hope), and our level of personal sacrifice (charity). The more that relationships are brought in line with correct principles, the more trust, vision, and sacrifice they require, leading to corresponding increases in mutual joy and fulfillment.
Hence we can see the importance of the “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” issued by the First Presidency. In an age of unbridled consumerism, decreased social cohesion, and increased self-absorption, the Lord has reminded us that family bonds if appropriately nurtured offer essential support. Family bonds increase stewardship and talent development. They challenge us to be better than we now are, rather than convince us to accept ourselves as we are.

At the apex of this principle is our relationship with God. Over and over the scriptures affirm that our identity is eternal---and connected with Him. It is our relationship with God (and with His Family), rather than any individual accomplishment, that is the very essence of existence (John 17).

All this should not be taken as an argument against individuality. The scriptures clearly affirm our ability to act independently. However, they also affirm that our actions are connected with people around us. And that is the essential part missing from many approaches to therapy, as well as from terms such as self-esteem.

Psychotherapy Practice and “The Self”

The individualistic “culture” of our profession may prevent us from recognizing inaccurate principles that may pervade our practice. For example, we may utilize a theoretical orientation that emphasizes “the self” over a relational perspective of optimal mental health. Individualistic practices have been noted in most of the popular approaches to therapy, including Behavioral (Kitchener, 1991), Cognitive (Prilleltensky, 1990), Gestalt (Saner, 1989), and Rogerian (Usher, 1989). If we fail to include the connected, unifying aspects of life in our perspective as therapists, we may unwittingly minimize the support available from non-clinical relationships. Or we may actually encourage a self-focused perspective in our clients by placing excessive emphasis on
individualism---or by making no intervention/interpretation when a client repeatedly/exclusively speaks of his or her own concerns without consideration of how these relate to others. Some have gone so far as to state that the problem of individualism (and hence many issues people have in our modern age) is not for psychology to cure, but rather for religion to cure (Vitz, 1994). We must lose ourselves, and allow ourselves to become “an object in the love and service of God” (Vitz, 1994, p. 160). Rather than seeking our own freely chosen ends, we can prevent the love of men from waxing cold by looking for opportunities to serve. We may even encourage our clients to find a purpose in life outside of themselves in a way that connects them with others through service and the process of relating to others. This is a very difficulty process, especially in our modern culture and “[I]n order for this to happen, one must let go of the selfish self and of its controlling will, bloated from constructing the interior apparatus of secular competence . . . With the preparation of mind and will, transcendent awareness of God’s love and will is possible by God’s grace” (Vitz, 1994, p. 160). In sum, in our practice we need to look beyond the “self” to the connectedness and interactive relationships that truly characterize existence and to divine spiritual sources that facilitate those connections.

Clearly, inaccuracies besides individualism could be discerned through further comparison of our current practices with the teachings of the Savior. This paper has merely focused on one of several potential conflicts between the culture of our profession and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Whatever our professional practices have been, we have only to gain by reevaluating their utility and compatibility with the Gospel (Scott, 1998). As the One who has most interest in and knowledge of our mental health, the Savior can
lead us to truths beneficial to our clients and to our own relationships. He can be our Mentor in creating or redefining the “culture” of our work with His children.
References


Advocates of positivism state that morality is a social convention and only the forces of nature can be spoken of scientifically. Empirical science is viewed as the pinnacle product of human existence and the only oracle of truth (i.e., Comte, 1896). In contrast, advocates of social constructivism (i.e., Gergen, 1991) indicate that laws and mores are merely shared beliefs that change as society changes; there are no universal moral “truths.”

Bergin (1980) was among the first to make this point. It has since been repeated and amplified by others (e.g., Jones, 1994).

The word *self* appears 17 times in the standard works. All 10 occurrences in the Book of Mormon are in Jacob 5, with the Lord referring to Himself. Three of the occurrences in the Bible also refer to God (Exodus 32:13; John 17:5; 1 Peter 2:24). Two occurrences refer to people being spoken to (1 Kings 20:22; Philemon 1:19), and two refute the importance of the *self* (John 5:31; 1 Corinthians 4:3). In the JST, the words *self-will* (Genesis 49:6) and *self-willed* (Titus 1:7; 2 Peter 2:10) also appear, but these have clearly negative connotations.