

COMMENTS ON THE PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

John Keith Wood, Ph.D.
Estância Jatoba'
Caixa Postal, 11
13820 Jaguariuna
Brazil

The Rust Workshop presents a useful context in which to study the person-centered approach to conflict resolution. It is a good example of the proposal, "The person-centered approach is not as good as believed; but, it is better than imagine." This example reveals several flaws in the approach, some easily rectified and some tragic. Personally, I believe that a genuine person-centered approach would have the potential to not only correct these errors, but would open possibilities beyond the imagination of the "person-centered practitioners."

I will be brief.

1. The basic assumptions of the person-centered approach to the resolution of conflicts are too simplistic.

To characterize, as Rogers does, all conflicts as based on an attitude of, "You are wrong; I am right," while logically correct, is too simplistic, an armchair version. It is not ample enough to deal with the reality: complex and explosive attitudes, feelings and actions that make up conflicts. It does not capture the subjective experience. None who has ever had the barrel of a loaded and cocked revolver pressed against his temple and told that he was about to die for such and such a reason could accept such a shallow analysis.

Violent and tragic conflicts are emotional. And although it may help, getting to know the other does not always resolve the basic issues. "Knowing" the murderers of his parents, one may still never forgive them. Sometimes opponents know each other only too well.

Conflicts are not merely emotional either. Humans kill each other to gain commercial advantages, for power over others, to possess territory or wealth (or even a woman), for greed, to spread an ideology, to preserve or enhance a race, to prove something: one's manhood, one's dedication to a cause, the power of one's beliefs.

Conflicts in the Middle East and other areas that humanity has occupied for thousands of years might have existed for a good part of that history. Thus, the matter of tradition must be considered. The matter of honor is also involved in conflicts. Revenge should be respected as a strong motive. Not only the common tit-for-tat variety, but also revenge that represents a religious mission. A member of a family may have a sacred duty to correct an injustice (revenge the death of his kin).

Once a conflict is glowing, all of these motives may surface. A teenager in Northern Ireland may murder a shopkeeper, not because he thinks he is right and the other is wrong, but as a rite of passage, to gain the manly respect of his comrades, out of religious duty, out of a sense of injustice, and perhaps just for the hell of it. Throughout history people have been slaughtered, not because the victim did anything (wrong or otherwise), but merely because the assassin was righteously angry, was doing a job, was filled with the love of God, or whatever. (1)

2. The organizers did not sufficiently trust the "wisdom of the group. The central hypothesis of the person-centered approach as regards groups, according to Rogers (1984), is that, "groups of individuals have within themselves vast resources for understanding and accepting their dynamics, for reduction and resolution of conflicts, and for constructive change in group goals and behavior." The major evidence that the organizers did not sufficiently trust this hypothesis is the following.

(a) Facilitator overkill: For less than 50 participants, there were ten or eleven facilitators. If one considers the translators, who were apparently skilled facilitators as well, and some of the participants who were experienced in the person-centered approach, there may have been something like one "facilitator" for every three "participants." Actions speak louder than words. The organizers did not seem to think the group could organize itself constructively and should be tightly controlled, or at least "helped" a great deal. (2)

(b) Restrictive structure: Organizing the time into small groups, big groups, lectures and so forth also suggests a distrust of the group being able to organize itself to deal with its own urgencies in a manner most conducive to it.

3. The organizers mis-understood or at least mis-applied past experience in this new situation. Rogers defends the organizers' choice of structure in his report on the Rust Workshop. He states, "The reason for thinking that this was just the right amount of structure is that there was none of the arguing or bickering about schedule, assignments and format which so often accompanies a workshop. To our amazement, there was not even a discussion about smoking or non-smoking."

But what is this "workshop" he is referring to in which there is bickering about the schedule and discussions of smoking or non-smoking? I suppose he is referring to workshops we conducted in the 1970's (or perhaps the watered-down versions now popular in Europe) consisting largely of psychologists and educators who are meeting with no agenda, very low-structure and very little purpose. This is a different workshop than one with "high-level government officials, especially from Central America" who are motivated to resolve painful conflicts in their region.

A basic principle of groups (and perhaps human nature), which Rogers does not seem to have grasped (nobody's perfect), is that the group's "wisdom" may be proportional to the group's "urgency." A group of psychologists and educators with nothing better to do will discuss whether the group should allow smoking or not or whether tape-recording or filming sessions should be permitted. However, if the group has a greater urgency it will deal with that. The "wisdom" is produced according to need.

I have been in many groups when someone announced a robbery, or a physical aggression, or the news that fulano is in his room screaming and threatening to commit suicide. I have never once heard someone say, "That may very well be, but I wish to discuss the issue of smoking or non-smoking here." The group's energy is directed toward the urgency at hand. The proverb, "When the house is on fire, the toothache flies out the window," is applicable in this case. Also, the most elegant solutions, it seems to me, were arrived at in the most severe crises.

This group of international personages, who perhaps were they not overly controlled, had the ability to deal with conflict and the grave issues in their regions, would not have likely discussed housekeeping rules regardless of the structure imposed on them -- including the low-structure of the workshops of the 1970's. They had more important things to do and very little time to do them. Were they to have been trusted more and been less "facilitated," they might even have devised a more efficient and effective approach to dealing with their urgencies and realized an even more constructive outcome. (3)

Rogers also refers to the Heurigen celebration as "good fortune." Of course it is an ancient facilitating event and it occurred at "the exactly right moment in the workshop." This may have been opportune. However, the subtle inference, from the point of view of the event, instead of the point of view of the group suggests that previous learnings had not been absorbed. If this was the first time such an activity occurred in a workshop, one might be obliged to give credit to that event. However, this sort of thing is one of the most consistent occurrences in workshops. That is, the group frequently uses an unplanned activity to facilitate what is needed to be facilitated at that moment. Such "breakthroughs" are always a surprise to the organizers because they could never have imagined that such a constructive outcome could occur outside of their "facilitated" activities.

This tendency to credit an event, rather than the creativity of the group, again suggests that, although attention has been paid to superficial patterns (such as establishing rules about smoking) which change with context, the essential patterns of group interaction have not been perceived by the "experts." The "workshop" consists not merely of the planned time blocks and formalities, but as a total experience, beginning to end.

4. The primary goals were not conflict resolution.

(a) Rogers (1984) in the workshop proposal states that, "The purpose of this workshop will be threefold. [First], it will give the participants the opportunity to experience a person-centered approach to group facilitation to the reduction of whatever tensions exist or arise in the participant group."

At that moment in his life, Rogers had an intense desire to "have an impact," to "give others an experience of the person-centered approach." And it was natural that he would want people to be able to use the person-centered approach for the betterment of humankind. However, to have as a primary goal, wanting to give people an experience of the person-centered approach almost guarantees less effectiveness. From our own experience with the person-centered workshops of the 1970's, it was well known that such an attitude is disastrous. It was exactly when we thought that we now understood what we were doing, no longer were risking failure by entering into the unknown, that our workshop resulted in palpable failure. The person-centered approach cannot be given. Attitudes may be assumed, (Oscar Wilde said, "The first obligation in life is to assume a stance."), intentions may be measured, will may be applied, but the essence of the person-centered approach is created by the group of which the facilitators are a part.

Furthermore, Rogers (I know this because I worked with him drafting the original proposal for this workshop) viewed "diplomats" as sort of narrow-minded politicians who needed to expand their perspective, open their eyes more, to be "impacted" by a broader vision. However, the diplomats I know in Switzerland, Hungary, Brazil, even The United States are not corrupt politicians, but broadminded statesmen. Of course, in general, some may be corrupt, as a certain percentage of any profession is, even psychologists and especially university professors. But no matter what their character, the central figures in any conflict are the ones who are best qualified to deal with that conflict, not outsiders.

Although outsiders can bring a special "objective" or "grander" perspective to local disputes. They are severely limited in their ability to generate creative solutions. For one thing, their "stakes" are not high. When they begin to inject their own narrow values into the phenomenon of all that makes up the group and its deliberations, they become a limiting influence, instead of a facilitating influence, as the Fermeda Experiment long ago demonstrated. (3)

In my opinion, Rogers's second purpose should have been the first. It was, "for staff and participants alike to contribute their knowledge, experience and skill to the formulation of an approach, drawing on the wisdom of all present, an approach which might be used in dealing with antagonistic groups or nations."

(b) The staff also appears to have had as an unstated goal the teaching of other cultural values to the participants. Solomon (1986), in his report on the workshop, states, "Each small group had two facilitators, a man and a woman. That was intended to provide an opportunity for modeling gender interaction, which might differ significantly from the kind of gender interaction that occurs in some of the cultures that were represented there." It appears that the American tendency to impose its values onto Central America has not changed. It used to be businessmen, introducing capitalism; then government, introducing democracy; now psychology, introducing political correctness: gender-interaction. When do you suppose the North Americans will begin to inform themselves about the cultures they are dealing with?

(c) The event, the spectacle, seems to have also taken precedence over conflict resolution. Again outside interests interfered. In the final moments of the workshop, significant members of the group had to leave to attend to the commercial or at least private interests of an Austrian bank. This, which occurred at the "peak" of the program, according to Rogers, "damaged the group process."

(d) The staff seems to have given an unnecessary amount of attention to itself. Rogers says that it met in the mornings and at the end of the day as a "support group for each other in a new and challenging situation." Were not the participants also in a new and challenging situation? Did the staff require more "support" than the participants because they were "supporting the group"? This Herculean image is not convincing. Furthermore, the notion that, as Rogers states, "It was essential that the staff keep in solid communication so that our unity would help the unity of the group," is an obsolete mystical idea from the workshops of the 1970's. Whatever the staff needs, do the participants not also need? There is no structural necessity. Are we all in this together, or not? There must have been the justifiable criticisms. Rogers replies weakly, "We must have seemed aloof because of this. At the time we could not see any way of remedying this deficiency." What about trusting the group?

(e) There was no common thread communicating the workshop's purposes to participants who would be forming the group. Solomon (1986) says that, "CSP ... recruited people with the expectation that this was going to be an application of the person-centered approach" Whereas, the University for Peace in Costa Rica recruited Latin American participants [with] expectations, "that this was going to be a diplomatic conference at which opposing positions could be presented, with the idea that those positions might be better understood by those in opposition once the full presentation had been made. ... We just started out with our expectations and they had their expectations and the two never completely got together." Rogers told me that there was considerable evidence that Carazo left the workshop "feeling hurt and somewhat unrecognized."

Participants with different expectations, even opposing expectations, is not uncommon in person-centered workshops. However, if a common thread unites them, there is the possibility to use these differences, even differences in values, to find creative solutions to conflicts. (See Wood [1984] for a more complete description of what we learned from pca workshops in the 1970's, including an observation on conflict resolution.)

A FINAL NOTE

Until now, the pca's record on conflict resolution is extremely meager. The Belfast group was perhaps the most legitimate attempt. Still, little occurred when participants returned home. Perhaps because the group was not realized in the context of the conflict but in the context of documenting an encounter group. El Escorial demonstrated that people from 22 different countries could survive ten days together in a resort setting. This was hardly a new learning. South Africa's so-called black/white encounters were not aimed at resolution of conflict. The context was a conference to meet an internationally known psychologist. This is not to suggest that significant progress was not made, nor that the person-centered approach does not have potential value. I believe the opposite.

From these criticisms, it might seem that the Rust Workshop was just that: ferrugem on the pca. However, I believe that the person-centered approach is extremely important in trying to deal with difficult conflicts. To test this belief one would need a real conflict.

And one would need to assemble the experience, intelligence and good will of participants in the conflict to bring about a successful outcome. Facilitator's attitudes are important, of course. However, empathic understanding, congruence and positive regard may not be as important in organizing any group activity as the courage to risk embarrassment and even failure to bring about a successful outcome.

NOTES

(1) I may appear harsh on Rogers's version of the person-centered approach to conflict resolution. In fact, I believe that it is a very viable alternative that may be used effectively. However, its successes have been exaggerated and its possibilities underrated by exponents and critics alike.

Although I may be neither for nor against the person-centered approach, I am no mere by-stander. For almost 25 years have worked passionately with this approach. Most of that time I was an intimate friend and colleague of Carl Rogers and I retain my respect and dedication to this relationship to this day.

(2) It is also possible that they did not trust themselves. Although Rogers eulogizes it as a very experienced staff, tempored by working together, to my knowledge this particular selection had never been tested as a unit under "combat" conditions. In terms of large group experience of the type necessary for such a meeting, only Rogers himself, Maria Bowen, Doug Land, Gay Swenson, Zucconi and yourself had the necessary experience, that I know of. (And this does not mean that all of them absorbed the necessary knowledge that such an experience offered.) I suspect that many simply "went along with the program." Nobody can blame them. Who really knows what will happen in such an unedited situation?

(3) Rogers and his staff have unwittingly repeated many of the faux pas of the organizers of the Fermeda Experiment. (Doob, 1970)

In 1969, a workshop was convened in the Italian alps for the purpose of applying behavioral science approaches to the peaceful resolution of conflicts. The organizer's own report, to its credit, illustrates many of the pitfalls to which convenors of such events may become victim.

Representatives who possessed ability and influence were invited from the countries of Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya -- three neighboring nations involved in a border dispute. The participants were organized into a large group which operated in a "Tavistok model" and several small groups which followed the "NTL or Bethal approach." Thus, like the Rust Workshop, there were small group meetings with facilitators and a large group meeting of the entire population.

Participants in the Fermeda workshop described the staff as acting evasive at times, holding themselves aloof for most of the workshop, and treating participants as though they were guinea pigs in an experiment. By their own admission, the staff "did not always appreciate the nuances of what participants told [them]. The [facilitators] occasionally gave unintentional offense through their interventions."

A participant offers the following observation about staff control: "The [facilitators], who gave a highly psychological interpretation to self-knowledge, regarded ideology as something that was not of deep concern and hence distracted attention away from the real intentions of individuals. Given these limitations, the activities of the participants can only be described as acquiescence or mere playing along with the activity of the group and the method under which it was guided. ... Both the arrangement of the discussion and the manner in which the participants entered the arrangement precluded any serious engagement."

By enforcing their own values, that ideology was unimportant, and not allowing the group to formulate appropriate responses for their deep concerns, such as ideology, the

organizers contributed to blocking the group from confronting and resolving its conflict. The group had no genuine opportunity to develop its own structure and methods to deal with the regional conflict of values, the cultural differences, the historical disputes and the other factors that made up the actual context of the conflicts. In the final phases of the workshop, the group could only resort to disappointing political recourses.

When the organizers apply, instead of participate in, the person-centered approach, just as when they apply the Tavistok approach, with an attitude, conscious or not, of having the answers for the group, of wanting to "give them an experience of the approach," or wanting to "model values to them," the group is doubtless hindered in achieving its self-governing and creative potential. By respecting the inherent creative potential in any group and beginning with the attitude, "Let's see what we can do together," and genuinely being willing to be changed by what occurs, facilitators may be able to legitimately count themselves part of an evolutionary step in consciousness.

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