

CRITICAL ESSAYS IN HONOR OF CARL ROGERS  
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A straightforward dictionary reading permits the following interpretation of the term, "critical essays." These would be essays guided by keen judgement, discernment, careful analysis. They might find fault, but more importantly they would be decisive and well-timed. Putting forward risky opinions or ideas might also be part of what characterizes such writings.

When a student or colleague was worried that some new research finding might not uphold the theory of client-centered therapy, Rogers was not concerned. For him, the theory was dispensable. It was merely the best approximation to describing the phenomenon of successful therapy at that moment. A better understanding of the phenomenon was the goal. He is widely quoted as saying in such situations, "Don't you see, facts are always friendly." The proposal of these essays is made in this spirit. Their purpose is not to criticize for its own sake but to expose these "friendly facts" that might enlarge, illuminate and render more useful our understanding.

Some suggested subjects for "critical essays" are the following:

SEMINAL IDEAS, CULTURE, PRODUCT OF THE TIMES - Many people delight in pointing out that Rogers's system of personality

change was a product of a mid-western United States, Anglo-American, Protestant consciousness, as it was developing during the period of the second world war. Doubtless, the system may be seen as a product of the times. Rogers admits this in introducing client-centered therapy in an early book. What system of personality change was not a product of its times, as seen like this? However, it is doubtful that this culture was totally responsible for the birth of client-centered therapy. Just as it is unlikely that (as some have claimed) client-centered therapy "revolutionized" the culture. There's little mystery here; they developed together.

In the 1930's Rogers defended putting children in foster homes by saying that the practice was based on the, "axiom ... that most children, if given a reasonably normal environment which meets their own emotional, intellectual, and social needs, have within themselves sufficient drive toward mental health to respond and make a comfortable adjustment to life." Later, after he had decided that psychotherapy was a more effective solution, he suggested that people would likely make a comfortable adjustment to life, if the therapist had certain attitudes and comported himself in a certain way.

In the 1980's, he was still arranging environments (now called, "creating conditions") and the seminal idea that people have a "sufficient drive toward ..." was also still present (now called, "the formative directional tendency").

Over some fifty years the practice was changed. Slight modifications sharpened its effectiveness. Innovations were introduced to accommodate the effect of time on cultural

conventions and the necessities of clients. Interpretations of the theory were bent around accordingly. The formal statement eventually could bend no further and became incapable of explaining all of the phenomena which were encompassed by practice. The initial formulations of the system's commanding principles did not seem to be consistent with recent explanations of practice and intention.

However, the fact that current practice no longer conforms to early explanations does not necessarily make the system inconsistent, unless one assumes that the axioms are fixed. They may not be. It is possible that the character of the commanding principles (themselves present from the beginning) evolved along with the system of personality change that these principles were organizing.

Just what, if any, are the limitations of this system due to its seminal ideas or the cultural setting in which it developed?

Is there an integrative formulation of the commanding principles, current practice and theory for the person-centered approach?

NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS - The theory proposed by Rogers in 1959 is still being debated. Research has not decided its validity. Rogerians do not seem inclined to test its hypotheses further, but will not concede its invalidity. Most outsiders are satisfied with the conclusion that the conditions are probably necessary, but not sufficient. It has also been pointed out that these conditions cannot be necessary and sufficient because that would leave no room for the will of the

client.

"Empathy," "congruence," "unconditional positive regard," "self" and other concepts have come into question in light of new research, expanded applications, different cultural contexts, and the inevitable effects of time. Traditional formulations of client-centered therapy are inadequate for the majority of applications of the person-centered approach. Rogers wrote in the introduction to his 1959 presentation that he expected someone to revise the theory within ten years. His wish is twenty-years overdue.

What would be a decent proposal for a theory of the person-centered approach?

WAY OF BEING, PRESENCE, INTUITION - When faced with explaining the complexity of applications of the person-centered approach, such as large group workshops, a collection of global expressions has been proposed to capture the essential qualities that facilitate constructive personality change and creativity.

Doubtless, such terms as "a way of being," "presence," and so forth, spring from a desire to name in a more complete, all-at-once, way a phenomenon that is part of the essence of successful therapy and other person-centered approach endeavors.

On the other hand, one cannot help but notice the journalistic influence in such attempts at short-hand. "Tell me Doctor Soandso, what would you say, in one word, is the essence of your theory?" Surely, only a banal understanding may result. Look what has been done with the word, "God."

If an adequate theory is really out of our reach, what might

be the substance of these terms, if any?

ECLECTICISM OR PURISM - Perhaps to deal with the complexity of certain cases, perhaps to deal with the practitioner's failure to achieve the desired results, perhaps to satisfy certain fashions, or perhaps merely due to personal taste, the person-centered approach is frequently linked with other philosophies or methods.

Indeed, this is one of the most popular topics for articles. For example, "focusing," while aligned with a "client-centeredly" practice, purports to fill in the missing links for success in individual psychotherapy. Gestalt therapy, tai chi chuan, and a host of other unlikely partners have been joined to the person-centered approach in order to correct what the inventor considers inadequate in the "traditional model."

On the other hand, Rogers believed (and a substantial number of others concur) that, "The truth is not arrived at by concessions from differing schools of thought."

Is there such a thing as the person-centered approach that is applicable to all of its ambitious areas of interest? What are its limitations and potentialities?

TOO INDIVIDUALISTIC - Rogers's has been criticized for promoting the individual at the expense of the society. Even person-centered group work which appears to deal more with social questions frequently turns out to enhance individualism even more than the more individualistic oriented client-centered therapy.

In South America the person-centered approach is often

linked with capitalism, implying a tool for maintaining class differences. This criticism has died down somewhat now that it is fashionable for socialist systems to be converted to capitalistic ones.

Is there something inherently self-centered, selfish, narrowminded in the person-centered approach?

PHENOMENOLOGY - There is a growing number of criticisms of Rogers work by "phenomenologists." The source of their irritation is not always clear. However, some have made explicit analyses. Anthony Barton, for example, did an excellent "phenomenological analysis" of client-centered therapy showing, among other things, that the phenomenon of relationship denies the therapist belief that he does not interfere in the client's "self." Maurice Friedman denounced encounter groups because of their shallow notion of the phenomenon of man. And Rollo May's objection to Rogers's thinking was in part due to their differences over the phenomenon of self.

What is the relationship between phenomenology and the study of the person-centered approach? How would the phenomenon of the person-centered approach be described?

A MOVEMENT - In producing a biographical statement on Carl Rogers for the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences in 1979, Nat Raskin writes, "The movement originated by Rogers is currently labeled the 'person-centered approach.' As such, it applies to interpersonal behavior and relationships in many fields ... " What characterizes this "movement"? Who would be part of it? What are its goals?

The suggestion of a "movement" is not merely the construction of eager disciples trying to enhance their identity (although, this also occurs). In the introduction to the book, Client-Centered Therapy Rogers writes a long paragraph citing the persons who would be "most likely to find portions of their own thought included in this book." The list starts with Virginia Axline and on the twenty-third name ends with that of H. Walter Yoder.

In the previous paragraph, Rogers had said, "So deep has been the mingling of thought and experience in this group that any member of the staff would be bold indeed to regard any conceptualization of psychotherapy as strictly his own." What is peculiar is that by so declaring, he not only became immune to his own analysis, Rogers implicitly became the head of a "movement." In the piece published in 1959 for Koch's epic review of psychology, history repeats itself. By listing the names of all who contributed to the "client-centered approach," few imagined that anyone but Rogers was truly responsible for the document. A movement was inevitable.

For the introduction to Hart and Tomlinson's book in 1970, the movement became more explicit. Rogers declared, "One might say that a 'technique' of counseling became a practice of psychotherapy. This in turn brought into being a theory of therapy and of personality. The theory supplied the hypotheses which opened a whole new field of research. Out of this grew an approach to all interpersonal relationships. Now it reaches into education as a way of facilitating learning at all levels. It is

a way of conducting intensive group experiences, and has influenced the theory of group dynamics. It has infiltrated industrial management, student personnel work, and the pastoral counseling of the religious worker in various fields. It has had significance in the area of community development, both here and abroad. It has been a prime force in the trend toward a new science of man, toward a new philosophy of the behavioral sciences. And still its delicate branches, like the tender shoots of a spreading vine, continue to reach further in new directions which continually surprise me."

Should the force of a movement be considered more valuable than its results? Is there really a person-centered movement? If not, how can this sort of concept be dispensed with? If so, what does it have to do with the person-centered approach?

HUMAN NATURE - It's unlikely that Carl Rogers really knew much about human nature, in a broad sense. He had his beliefs like everyone. He had every advantage in life. Yet, he had compassion for those less fortunate. He was certainly justified in describing what he had observed about human nature in an intimate relation with his psychotherapy clients. This is invaluable knowledge.

Should it not have been left at that? Once the speculation begins where does it stop?

Does the person-centered approach have a unique insight about human nature?

PERSON-CENTERED - The term "person-centered," gained favor over "client-centered" when applications broadened and it was



necessary to include not only psychotherapy clients, but also students, family members, and others who might participate in a person-centered activity.

Nevertheless, the term is also troubling. Does it mean to suggest that this approach is centered on the persona? The mask or role of the person? The superficial self? Surely the approach intends more.

Or perhaps not. It is precisely the more superficial self that is the object of client-centered therapy. Even though it may be a more profound "self" (both the therapist's as well as the client's) that is employed in any constructive transformation of the persona.

What is the significance of all these various selves to the person-centered approach? How is the term "person-centered" to be understood?

RELATIONSHIP - An ancient insight is that the healing power of psychotherapy resides in the human relationship. However, in formulations of client-centered therapy, this relationship has been weakly portrayed -- a client with a therapist who does something to facilitate: "listening," "being sensitive," "creating an environment." Little is said about the client's part. Even the vast body of research on placebo effect is ignored.

I take it that the main criticism of Rogers's Wisconsin project was not so much that the therapist lacked sufficient machismo (a form of congruence), but that he did not really enter into a deeply human relationship with the patient.

Physiology researchers tell us that, "The autonomic nervous system is as much a social structure as a vegetative one." And that, "To be human means to live through a body that is both biologically incomplete without other human beings and utterly dependent on others for its emotional -- that is, human -- development and meaning."

How does this effect our understanding of the therapist in the relationship? Of the client? And, of participants in a group?

How would one describe the phenomenon of the human relationship within the context of the person-centered approach?

RESPECTED BUT FORGOTTEN CLIENT - Besides the absence of the client's will in many formulations of the person-centered approach, how might one interpret that troubling research of Quinn, that shows that in evaluating empathy one only need listen to the therapist? Rogers chose the easy way. He interpreted this finding as proof that the therapist gives empathy to the client, an explanation denied by a substantial body of research as well as by common sense.

EMPATHIC UNDERSTANDING - Over the years, Rogers had referred to empathy as a "state" (his initial term), as a "process" (his latest word), as a "condition," an "attitude," a "quality," an "ability," an "aptitude," and a "source of knowledge."

These seemingly contradictory terms are understandable, if one places them into context: empathic understanding is a condition, in the sense that it may be necessary for successful psychotherapy. Trying to understand the expressions of the client

and what meanings his or her thoughts and feelings have for him or her, the therapist adopts a particularly attentive attitude (and perhaps clients do this as well). Empathic understanding seems to be a quality of the effective therapeutic relationship. It is a state of consciousness of the therapist and the client who share a vivid perception of the world of the client and of "what is universally true." It is a process in the sense that this state of consciousness is not fixed, but exists in flux, just as the relationship itself. It becomes an ability or aptitude when one learns how to sense the deep personal meanings of another person and communicate this to him or her. It is a source of knowledge in the sense that this "out of the ordinary" state of consciousness permits intuitively "knowing what one does not know" and unexpected insights.

What do you call the intimate and insight-provoking relations between participants in group? How should one treat the findings that suggest that the client, and not the therapist, is more influential in empathic understanding?

CONGRUENCE - If a small group facilitator is congruent with the group, not necessarily with an individual participant, the approach may work. On the other hand, when the facilitator (even such as Carl Rogers) tells a participant exactly what he thinks, it might result in an unsuccessful group.

When the context is no longer psychotherapy, with assumptions about the therapist being on the side of the client no matter what happens or what he says, (such as in small groups or in the freeforall large groups), how is congruence to be

understood? What are its limitations?

ENVIRONMENT - Rogers was fond of saying that he "created an environment," but his lack of sensitivity to the total environment makes his claim suspicious.

Why do "workshops" or "training programs" enjoy so much success? For one thing, they are not conducted in a neon-lighted office on Broadway in downtown Capital City for one-and-one-half hours each Tuesday afternoon. They are convened on placid Lake Lugano in Switzerland, in a colorful old coffee fazenda outside Rio de Janeiro, by the lively sea, in the vastness of a desert plateau, in a place charged with negative ions, emanating beauty and peacefulness. They allow time for participants to think, reflect on their lives, to enforce their personal values or to reformulate others. What could not be a success in such settings?

What then does "psychological climate" mean for the person-centered approach? Is it created or always there? What is its effect on the creative process?

FULLY FUNCTIONING PERSON - Rogers's primary motivation for speculating on a "fully functioning person" was to try to describe the end-point in successful therapy.

However, his description is so contaminated by 1960's California, so culturally bound, as to be next to useless.

Nevertheless, what's wrong with Rogers's intention? Shouldn't we try to become all we can become?

SELF-ACTUALIZATION - The Humanistic Psychology Journal has published several criticisms of the "actualizing tendency." Most

of these articles have concentrated on the notion of "self-actualization" as proposed by Abraham Maslow. Nevertheless, Rogers's concept (adapted from Maslow) is also indirectly indicted.

For example, Rogers has been criticized for "positing a reality whose nature is inexplicable and paradoxical." Since we live in exactly such a reality, the critic's concern becomes ridiculous. To trust the "real self," according to this critic, could lead to "harmful and undesirable actions justified in the name of conscience and authenticity." Since most harmful and undesirable actions are justified in this way, the critic's concern is not specific.

Nevertheless, such persistent suspicion of the "actualizing tendency" suggests that for many something smells fishy. Certainly it is a topic for critical analysis and clarification.