THE PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH

The fact that the phrase The Person-Centered Approach came into common usage at a time (late 60's, early 70's) when it would be applied to a hodge podge of activities, has obscured both its historical and theoretical significance.

Instead of thinking of it as on top of a pile of activities loosely related to client-centered therapy, I suggest thinking about The Person Centered Approach as at the base of these activities. For the following reasons.

From the beginning of his work, Rogers was cultivating an Approach that ended up thirty years later being called The Person Centered Approach.

To be sure, he also sometimes wrote "approach" as a synonym for "therapy," which has added to a certain amount of confusion. However, he always returned to the basic Approach, as "a way of being;" more and more so, as it became increasingly difficult to stretch the theory of client-centered therapy to explain the widening range of other applications of the Approach. Let's go back to the beginning.

As a young psychologist in Rochester, New York, he spoke in terms of "moving away from any APPROACH which was coercive or pushing."

In 1937, at the National Council of Social Work meeting in Indianapolis, he presented a paper titled, "The Clinical Psychologist's APPROACH to Personality Problems."

In his first major book, "The Clinical Treatment of the Problem Child (1939), he sketched the APPROACH he had gleaned from, what he regarded as, the commonalties between successful psychotherapeutic practices.

Then, as his own distinctive method of psychotherapy became more precisely formulated, the Approach came to be known as the Non-Directive APPROACH (Rogers, 1942).

As methods and hypotheses were refined, as research support was collected for the increasingly effective client-centered therapy, the Approach began to be consistently referred to as the Client-Centered APPROACH (Rogers, 1946). It was applied to client-centered therapy as well as group-centered leadership and student-centered teaching.

Until the 1970's, it continued to be known as the Client-Centered Approach, or, as many client-centered therapists, referring to the essence of their effective psychotherapy called it, "client-centeredness."

Then, as applications of the Client-Centered Approach began to be further developed in fields other than psychotherapy (such as education,

medicine, social work, small group and large group learning experiences), it began to be called The Person-Centered APPROACH (Rogers, 1977).

For the first thirty years, Rogers's personal application of The Person-Centered Approach was largely concentrated on the development of a system of personality change which focused on the individual's subjective world. The following thirty-years, he concentrated as well on social interactions and on learning by doing.

Thinking about The Person-Centered Approach in this way takes nothing whatsoever from Client-Centered Therapy while, at the same time, gives a basis for the development of theory and practice in the various other applications.

So that the notion I am suggesting does not remain abstract, I want to take the time to propose a tentative definition of The Person-Centered Approach:

Rogers's (person-centered) approach was cultivated over time out of a specific stance or "way of being," which can be described, in part, as consisting of beliefs, attitudes and abilities.

BELIEFS
1. Rogers's worldview integrated "therapist" and "client(s)" in the therapeutic or social activity. In this regard, he relied on what he called the "formative directional tendency," which he described as,

> "an evolutionary tendency toward greater order, greater complexity, greater interrelatedness. In humankind, this tendency exhibits itself as the individual moves from a single-cell origin to complex organic functioning, to knowing and sensing below the level of consciousness, to a conscious awareness of the organism and the external world, to a transcendent awareness of the harmony and unity of the cosmic system, including humankind." (Rogers, 1980, p.133)

2. Rogers possessed the conviction that he could act constructively (with a client or in a group) and that THAT was the most important thing to do at that moment.

3. The client's (group participant's) belief is also a factor. The effective ritual is one in which both therapist (group facilitator, teacher, workshop convenor) and client(s) engage in an activity they believe they must do for healing or significant learning to take place.

ATTITUDES
1. Rogers's intention was not to do "good therapy," be a "good teacher," a "respected group facilitator," but to do what was necessary to

make a constructive outcome of whatever activity he was involved in more likely.

2. He had, and expressed, respect for the potential of the person or the group to be self-directive, to be creative, and to behave constructively.

3. He had respect for the individual's autonomy and dignity.

In one of Rogers's early attempts to describe his approach as applied to psychotherapy, he proposed that the therapist would have "a capacity for sympathy which will not be overdone, a genuine receptive and interested attitude, or deep understanding which will find it impossible to pass moral judgments or be shocked or horrified." This therapist would have, "a deep-seated respect for the [person's] integrity. ... a willingness to accept [him] as he is on his own level of adjustment, and to give him some freedom to work out his own solutions to his problems."

4. He was curious and open to discovery of new perspectives. He assumed a learning posture that allowed him to step aside from known theories and methods when they were not effective and try to learn from the experience itself what WAS effective.

He was not bound by even a previous successful experience, but able to start over again under new circumstances. His interest was "not in truth already known or formulated but in the process by which truth is dimly perceived, tested and approximated." (Rogers, 1974)

5. He was "real" or genuinely himself, without false fronts or pretense. He was usually willing to share with an individual or group what he actually felt at any given moment. He would not do this gratuitously, but as he thought it would be constructive in terms of the motives for the event.

6. He was willing, within reason, to be changed by the experience: in the vein that Martin Buber (1966) had proposed,

> "I felt I have not the right to want to change another, if I am not open to be changed by him as far as it is legitimate."

ABILITIES

1. He cultivated the ability to concentrate intensely on both the linear, piece-by-piece, appearance of reality and its all-at-once, or holistic perception.

In client-centered therapy, this was known as "empathic understanding."

2. He learned a tolerance for uncertainty or ambiguity. Keats's (1899) Shakespeare is the example: That is, to have "negative capability ... capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

His personal, interpersonal and transpersonal approach was the same. He turned the best part of himself toward the best part of the other in order that something of lasting value might be accomplished that none could have done alone.

I would like to encourage those interested to refine this list, to help make the key features of The Person-Centered Approach more precise without strangling its essence with over-definition.

ASSOCIATION CENTERED ON PSYCHOTHERAPY

The proposed organization IS inclusive, in that it is intended for psychotherapists (as opposed to teachers, for example) and that it addresses psychotherapy (as opposed to education). Naturally, this emphasis excludes other applications of The Person-Centered Approach.

Nevertheless, I do not feel that it diminishes or disparages other applications. In fact, I think that an organization devoted specifically to psychotherapy would give organizations concerned with The Person-Centered Approach (a different category from Psychotherapy) or its other applications, more support. Psychotherapy would have its rightful place alongside other applications, in these organizations. And, The Person-Centered Approach itself might be given more consideration for its relevance to the various applications, since these other organizations would not be required to deal so heavily with the professional concerns of psychotherapists (which make up a large percentage of their memberships).

Furthermore, I think that forming an organization exclusively for psychotherapists is perfectly legitimate and, from what I can tell such an alternative seems to be in demand at this time. Any inclusivity or umbrella should be extended to cover methods of psychotherapy that share (perhaps loosely, perhaps not, depending on the members' desires) The Person-Centered Approach as a basis or which members feel could be called Person-Centered Therapy.

EUROPEAN ORGANIZATION

I am no expert on this subject. I suspect that what gives an organization its character includes its underlying philosophy, the language it uses, and the place where the day to day work is carried out. The philosophy is fixed (although there is a range for argument between

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Experientialism , Existentialism, Phenomenology, and so forth). English has been established as the official language. So, place might be something to experiment with.

To give an idea of the force of propinquity: In the first ICCCEP conference in Leuven, out of 222 participants, 64% came from an area that could be circumscribed by a radius of 150 or so miles. From all of Latin America, only two persons attended the conference; from Asia, five (all from Japan); from Australia, one; from Africa, two. The rest came from other parts of Europe and European North America.

Wherever the center of activities is, most will come from nearby. So, if one wanted a truly international organization, perhaps one could move the headquarters around at intervals that would not be too short to preserve continuity, nor too long to prevent change.

Whether or not some organizational structure could accomplish this, I don't know. As Max Weber has said, the human is "an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun."

Another way to look at it is that with all this interest in Europe and European North America, maybe a European organization is exactly what it should be. It would not have any higher claims to internationalness than any other organization, but it would be filling a need.

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