

# THE PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH: TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF ITS IMPLICATIONS

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**ABSTRACT.** *The person-centered approach is not a psychology, a psychotherapy, a philosophy, a school, a movement nor many other things frequently imagined. It is merely what its name suggests, an **approach**. It is a psychological posture, a way of being, from which one may confront various aspects of human behavior.*

*The best known activity it has been applied to is client-centered therapy, which is a psychotherapy, has a theory, a method and has accumulated a substantial body of research generally supporting its theoretical assertions.*

*This article considers the some sixty years of applications of the person-centered approach to phenomena which include – as well as psychotherapy – education, encounter groups, and large groups intended to improve transnational understanding, to explore intergroup conflicts, to learn the nature of culture and its process of formation.*

*Observations over the last thirty years have revealed shortcomings in the psychology of client-centered therapy, as a suitable theory for applications of the person-centered approach. A direction is indicated for the formulation of an appropriate psychology for all of the application –including client-centered therapy itself.*

*Reflection on this discussion might also inform the practice of psychotherapy as well as suggesting "interdisciplinary" projects that would be naturally unified by the paradigm proposed.*

## AN EXAMPLE OF A PUBLIC MENTAL HEALTH PROJECT INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM AN APPLICATION OF THE PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH<sup>1</sup>

In the late 1960's in the United States many people underwent dramatic life-transitions. Not only young people. Due to political decisions, thousands of middle-aged scientists and engineers were unemployed and many were forced to make radical changes in their ways of living. Throughout the nation, some 100,000 scientists were unemployed. This example is about some 250 of this group who lived in San Diego, California.

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The crisis began with the government's cancellation of contracts for the construction of a super-sonic aircraft. In one sense, it was a victory for the environment, as this vehicle was expected to cause certain ecological damage. On the other hand, it was a devastating defeat for those who lost their jobs.

Who were these people? The population consisted of technical workers, engineers and scientists, almost all men. A familiar story was the following. A young man joined the armed forces during World War II. He served his country honorably. With the war's end, he took advantage of veteran's benefits and enrolled in a university. After four years he had been awarded a degree in engineering. (For some, a couple of more years led to a master's degree. A few went on for a doctorate in physics, biology, or an engineering specialty.)

On graduating from the university, his services were in great demand. This was the time that the country was rebuilding and expanding. Job offers were abundant, especially in the growing "aerospace industry." He got a good job and began to advance within the organization. He bought a house in the suburbs, a boat, or a trailer for camping excursions, a new car every year. He made investments, provided insurance for his survivors, arranged for his children's teeth to be straightened, put away money for their university education, and, in general, became an important and contented member of his community. Two decades or so later, around age 48, he lost his job.

When I arrived in San Diego (an ex-mathematician and engineer myself), there were some twenty or so engineers and scientists voluntarily organizing a "job bank," to help each other find employment. I joined them. At first, we thought perhaps people could find employment with other manufacturers of aircraft or aircraft components. All we had to do was to contact the companies, find out what openings they had, and put the right man in the right job.

What we quickly learned was that there were virtually no job openings in the aerospace industry.

So, we began to look into related activities: bio-medical engineering, pollution management, environmental specialties, technical marketing, small business management and so forth. Disappointingly, these industries wanted only young people trained in the technology that they dealt with.

Next, we petitioned politicians such as the mayor and the board of supervisors of the region, the governor. We proposed that every level of community was in need of technical assistance to resolve various problems: control of air pollution, sewage disposal and treatment, crime and security. Why not hire an unemployed engineer? Yes, the problems exist. Yes, we need help. No, we do not have funds to employ your people.

Could the state give a grant for scientific research? Could the county pay for a study of its swamp lands and the ecological threat that housing developments were introducing into the area? Could scientists be hired as teachers in the city school system? We made proposals to every sector of the community: without success.

A "demonstration" was even staged, a quiet march through the downtown streets to advertise our plight. The television journalists loved it, but nothing came from this effort. After a couple of weeks, the journalists were looking for what was new. Unemployed scientists quickly became an old story.

The telephone campaign continued. Engineers and scientists, themselves unemployed, worked on a voluntary basis in a small office the state loaned us. They tried to find jobs for their colleagues who came into the office to register for the meager unemployment insurance. Volunteers telephoned local businesses, factories, and other sources of employment on a regular basis asking for what openings existed and recommending that the enterprise consider our population.

The volunteers also listened to the stories of the recently unemployed who came to the office for help. They told their own stories as well. A common pattern was repeated: At first the unemployed person was not too concerned. He was receiving a few weeks of insurance payments. Also, most received a pretty good payment from funds their previous employer had put aside for their retirement. Thus, they had income for a few months.

Initially, they concentrated on looking for a job as good or better than the one they had. They certainly would not consider working for less salary. Without success, they began to apply for lower-level jobs. For example, managers of big engineering departments began applying for jobs as ordinary engineers. Still, with no success and time passing, they began to become worried and applied for jobs well beneath their training and ability. Many related that they had eventually become desperate and had even tried to get work in a gasoline filling station. They were turned down because they were "over-qualified." They were willing to work, but no matter how humble they became, nobody wanted them. This experience was not only humiliating, it often left the person feeling depressed and hopeless.

While we tried everything we could think of to find work for people and to help them prepare themselves in the best possible way to present themselves in job interviews and while we listened to their stories in the volunteer office, we noticed an inexplicable but nevertheless constructive and encouraging phenomenon: Volunteers who came to the office, worked the telephones and talked to people coming in, quickly found employment: if not a formal job, nevertheless, a satisfying new direction for their lives.

Were they to have always found employment in their old line, we could suspect that they were merely privy to inside information about job openings and stepped in to claim the prize, instead of passing it on to one of their unemployed colleagues. However, this was not the case. As often as they found similar employment, they resolved their problem creatively: sometimes beginning a completely new career in a different line.

What was happening? What did this observation mean? Could it be that by merely sitting around the office and drinking coffee, trying to help another (and oneself), conversing with each other more honestly than one might converse with acquaintances, sharing one's life story, one's aspirations, a person's life transition could be facilitated?

If it were so, we could certainly take advantage of this discovery. To test the hypothesis, a small prototype project was proposed: we would invite unemployed scientists to a group meeting where they would have a chance to do what was taking place within our office spontaneously: That is, learn what they needed to know to look for work effectively, reflect on their common life-situation, share informally their feelings regarding this crisis, explore with others practical solutions to their and other's problems. Although nobody could produce a theory to explain how this might be beneficial, the fact was that in spite of a herculean effort, no other approach had offered the slightest hope of helping, let alone success on a significant scale.

The results of the small group we convened to test this hypothesis, confirmed its potential value. Participants in the group quickly resolved their problems. On the basis of the pilot group's success, the state government gave us a small grant to conduct a longer program that would also be researched to better understand what was going on. Unemployed people were given the opportunity to attend what were called "job clinics." There were some twenty. Each consisted of a group of around 10 unemployed scientists, one or two counselors or supervisors from the state unemployment service (who, through their participation, were also receiving training, in a sense, which they could later use in their work), and two group facilitators (usually a male and a female—only a few facilitators and no participants took part in more than one group). The group met

daily for a week which included a two-day intensive experience and afterwards, once a week for three hours in the evening for ten weeks.

For the purpose of research, this group was matched with an equal number of similar persons who did not participate in the "job clinics" and did not participate in any government program of counseling or retraining. A third group was constituted from the official reports of people who receive the authorized unemployment counseling from professionals who work for the government agencies.

Six months after a person had completed the "job clinic," he was asked to evaluate his transition. The results were significant. People who participated in the "job clinic" had an **80%** chance of being engaged in a satisfying occupation. Around half of these persons were trying out and were content with an activity they thought they would like which was different from their previous work. Almost one-third were engaged in an endeavor that they had always wanted to do. For example, one fellow became a veterinarian; another, who had invented a 2-cycle gasoline engine as a hobby, was hired by a large motor manufacturer to supervise the design and fabrication of his engine; a metallurgist whose hobby was photography became a crime photographer for the police force; an aircraft stress analyst became a successful film maker, inventing several special effects techniques.

People who "did nothing" had around an **even** chance (57% in San Diego and around 46% nationwide) of realizing these same options. Statistically, these findings are indisputable: the "job clinic" definitely helped people reconstruct their lives in a positive and creative manner. The astonishing finding was that unemployed scientists and engineers who received conventional unemployment counseling had a mere **30%** chance of achieving what the other groups achieved. Thus, it may sometimes be better to "do nothing" than receive certain kinds of "help."

### **REFLECTIONS ON THIS PROJECT AS RELEVANT TO AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH**

Unwittingly, in developing these programs to help unemployed scientists, we had applied an approach indistinguishable from the person-centered approach.

What had we done?

After testing, to no avail, all the conventional wisdom, we applied no further theories. Without realizing it, we followed the advice of J.W. Von Goethe: "Let the facts themselves speak for their theory. Don't look for anything behind the phenomenon; they themselves are the theory" (Bortoft, 1986). The unemployed person himself spoke for the "theory" and we followed this lead.

It must be emphasized that we were extremely active. We tried everything we (or anyone else) thought of that might resolve the problems of the group or of an individual in the group. Almost every approach we tried was unsuccessful in facilitating the life transitions of a significant number of persons in the unemployed group.

By exhausting every recourse, trying to help the person in crisis formulate his own response to his situation, and observing the subtle realities that were taking place, we finally recognized that there were certain psychological factors that were active in helping people make a successful transition and that these factors could be promoted to be of real help to more people. In this case, we realized the truth in Martin Buber's (1958) insight: "Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about" (p.12).

### *Attempts at "helping"*

At first, because they asked, we tried to teach people how to look for work: how to write a curriculum vita, how to dress for interviews, how to present oneself. Then, when we discovered that there were psychological factors involved, we offered group experiences which were structured in a way to elicit participants to speak about and to reflect on their lives. Later, we discovered that the essential elements were already present in the *meeting*. Our task was to provide the moment and the place and the unencumbered time necessary for deep reflection to take place. This was not as difficult as it may seem because participants intuitively realized this and they themselves provided both the urgency and the creative vitality necessary.

### *The personal dimension*

A promising psychology is beginning to develop around concepts and findings from evolutionary biology, cognitive psychology and brain researches. One small aspect concerns the notion that the brain consists of various "modules," specialized functions having developed to deal with particular necessities of the organism during evolution. Some of the difficulties an individual encounters may be the result of using a "module" or a way of thinking that is not suitable for the problem at hand.

One could notice such a phenomenon among the population of unemployed scientists and engineers. For example, many thought like a twenty-three-year-old first beginning a career: "I must find a good paying job. It must have room for advancement, so that my salary may increase to provide for my growing family: buy a good home, education, and so forth. I may wish to do something else, but I must not think of myself. My family must come first."

However, a forty-eight-year-old man whose children were grown and whose house was paid for and who, for the first time in his life, had the opportunity to do what he *really wanted to do*, and thought like a twenty-three-year-old was surely using the wrong "module."

Often, beginning to think in a more realistic way about what one really wished to do for the rest of his life put him on the road to this new life.

### *The social dimension*

Unemployed persons who shared their feelings, view of life, their hopes and fears with those who were facing similar problems—that is, with those who could understand at a deep level what they were experiencing—seemed to more quickly find the way out of their difficulties.

This was no mere catharsis. In addition to sharing feelings, they offered practical advice to each other. Not gratuitous advice, they offered suggestions which were synchronous with the person's desired direction. For example, an engineer whose lifetime desire was in art, who painted, but never showed his work, was put in touch with the brother-in-law of another group participant who had an art gallery. The contact resulted in the new artist selling several of his paintings and putting his new career on a solid basis.

There is also something to be said for the process of helping each other imagine how they wish to spend their life. This results not only in mutual support and encouragement but also in bringing their dreams more into focus, and somehow bringing them more within reach.

### *The ambience*

The location of the group meetings seemed to influence the initiation of a creative process in group participants. When meetings were conducted in a drab government warehouse where space had been allotted, participants were much more inhibited and much less likely to explore their feelings deeply. When meetings were held in the eucalyptus grove that surrounds the beautiful

University of California campus, the process of self-discovery in participants seemed to be facilitated by the place alone.

Thus, the successful approach was not at all efficient, but it was *effective*. It was, as I have learned from farming, a bit like nature herself: preferring *potential* to productivity and rewarding *patience*, instead of enterprise.

Therefore, in this case, the person-centered approach might be described, in part, as consisting of:

A *belief* that something can be done and that those who have a problem also have the creative resources to overcome this problem.

A *respect* for the dignity and autonomy of the person. He or she is the one to decide about his or her life.

A *recognition* of the value of social interaction: one alone is nothing; two is a unity. The majority of persons, both in the "experimental group" and those who "did nothing," said that they found their "new direction in life" through personal relations with others.

A *tolerance* for uncertainty. We tried things that we understood and they did not work. We did things that we did not understand and they did work.

We turned the best part of ourselves toward the best part of our colleagues in order to accomplish something of lasting value that neither could have done alone.

If a central hypothesis from observations of this project would be stated, it might be something like this: Given the appropriate environmental and psychological conditions, people possess the capacity to reorganize perceptions of themselves and of their reality and to make creative and constructive life-transitions.

With the preceding example and observations in mind, perhaps we can attempt a preliminary definition of the person-centered approach.

### WHAT THE PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH IS NOT

First, it is neither a *psychotherapy* nor a *psychology*. It is not a *school*, as in "the behaviorist school." Itself, it is not a *movement*. However, this does not mean that a movement may not attach itself to its name. As William James (1907) has noted about the philosophy pragmatism, "A number of tendencies that have always existed in philosophy have all at once become conscious of themselves collectively, and of their combined mission; and this has occurred in many countries, and from so many different points of view, that much unconcerted statement has resulted" (p. 5). Likewise, people who have nothing more in common than that they believe in democracy or that they oppose psychoanalysis or whatever, at times gather together at conferences or workshops in the name of the person-centered approach. However, they quickly fall to bickering as it becomes obvious that they are linked by a word and not by a reality.

Although many have noted "existential" positions in its attitudes and others have referred to "phenomenologic" perspectives in its intentions, it is not a *philosophy*. Nor is it any number of other things frequently imagined.

### WHAT THE PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH IS

It is merely, as the name implies, an **approach**, nothing more; nothing less. It is a psychological posture, if you like, from which thought or action may arise and experience be organized. It is a "way of being" (Rogers, 1980).

In part, it consists of:

A *reliance* on a "formative directional tendency" that Rogers (1980, p.133) has 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.

A *will* to act constructively (to help) that is powered by the conviction that this is possible and that to do so is the most important thing in the world at this moment.

An *intention* to be effective in one's objectives. In the case of client-centered therapy, it is the intention to help another human being make constructive personality changes. It does not consist in merely *showing* that you are trying to help, but in actually helping. It is not trying to do "good therapy," but in doing what favors the best outcome for the client.

Having *compassion* (that would not exclude expressing kindness) for the individual and respect for his or her *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." Rogers also thought the therapist should be expected to have "a sound understanding of himself, of his outstanding emotional patterns, and of his own limitations and shortcomings" (Kirschenbaum, 1979, p. 96).

A *flexibility* in thought and action. This "way of being" is not bound by concepts or trained behaviors, not even by previous learnings.

An *openness* to new discoveries. Perhaps a "learning posture." One's interest is, "not in truth already known or formulated but in the process by which truth is dimly perceived, tested and approximated" (Rogers, 1974).

An *ability* to intensely concentrate and clearly grasp the linear, piece by piece, appearance of reality as well as perceiving it holistically or all-at-once.

A *tolerance for uncertainty or ambiguity*. From this approach one is able to live without being attached to a particular form or outcome. Like Keats's (1899) Shakespeare, a facilitator possesses a "*negative capability*... capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (p. 277).

Though certainly not the exclusive possession of this approach, a sense of *humor*, *humility*, *curiosity* doubtless play a part also.

In less precise language, but perhaps more precise communication, the **approach** consists of turning the best part of oneself toward the best part of the other in order that something of lasting value may be accomplished that neither could have done alone.<sup>2</sup>

## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CLIENT-CENTERED THERAPY AND THE PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH

Client-centered therapy and the person-centered approach belong to different **categories**. Client-centered therapy is a *psychotherapy*. The person-centered approach is an *approach*: to

psychotherapy, to education, to encounter groups, to large group workshops for transcultural understanding, learning about culture formation, or for the resolution of intergroup conflicts.

Client-centered therapy has a specific and coherent *theory* (Rogers, 1959). The person-centered approach has no theory.

There is a *method* for conducting client-centered therapy. It has not been so well specified as the theory and varies substantially between therapists. However, Rogers's own technique has been extensively documented (including many films and audio recordings) and can be precisely described. (For recent analyses, see Brodley [1994] and Ellis & Zimring [1994].)

On the other hand, the *approach* has no specific method. Methods are developed according to the demands of each application. For example, facilitative behavior in groups is somewhat different, and at times may even be contradictory, to therapist behavior in individual therapy intended to facilitate personality change. Nevertheless, they are derived from the same **approach**. We will return shortly to the subject of method in applying the approach.

For client-centered therapy, a substantial body of *research* has accumulated that has tested hypotheses proposed from studying its theory and practice. Although the research has, in general, been unable to convince the majority of psychologists of the theory's validity, what has been most convincing and has improved psychotherapy on the whole has been client-centered therapy's success in the clinic. The person-centered approach has not been researched as such.

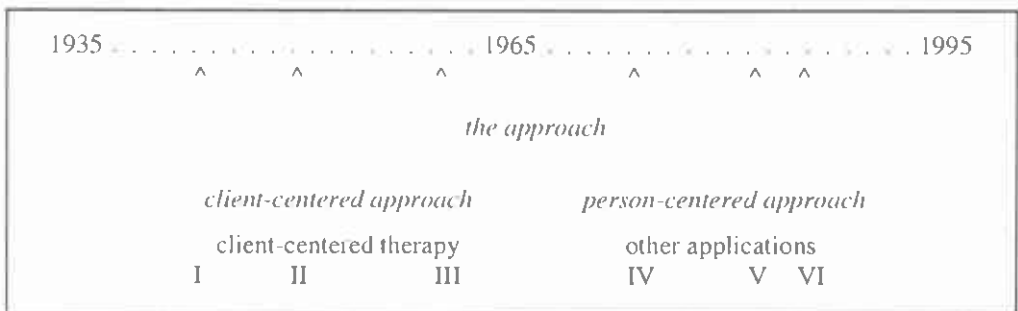
### AN APPROACH BY ANY OTHER NAME

The person-centered approach is the same approach that was used to develop client-centered therapy and other activities. Of course, the **approach** has only recently been called "person-centered." In the beginning, it was merely *an* approach (Rogers, 1939). Then as a distinctive method for practicing psychotherapy was formulated, the approach began to be known by the subsequent developments: the *non-directive approach* (Rogers, 1942), and then the *client-centered approach* (Rogers, 1946).

Until the early 1970's, it continued to be called the *client-centered approach*. Then, as applications of the **approach** began to be further developed in fields other than psychotherapy, it became known as the *person-centered approach* (Rogers, 1977).

The first thirty-year **client-centered approach** period was largely concerned with the development of a system of personality change which concentrated on the individual's subjective world. The following thirty-years of the **person-centered approach** period has been concerned as well with social interactions and has concentrated on learning from doing.

The following schematic may help visualize this history.





I. **Attitudes of the therapist.** Characterized by Rogers's book, *Counseling and psychotherapy* published in 1942.

II. **Methods of therapy.** Identified by the publication *Client-Centered Therapy* (1951).

III. **Internal process or experience.** Corresponds with the best-seller, *On becoming a person* (1961).

IV. **The facilitation of learning.** *Freedom to learn* (1969).

V. **Interpersonal relationships.** *On encounter groups* (1970).

VI. **Social processes and cultural transformation.** *On personal power* (1977) and *A way of being* (1980).

Although, client-centered *therapy* and the person-centered *approach* are different, Rogers (1987, p.13) made it clear that the **approach** itself, by whatever name, was the same. He insisted:

To speak of a 'client-centered approach' and a 'person-centered approach' as though they were entities opposed to each other is, in my estimation, a sure road to futile wrangling and chaos. . . . I hope I may be allowed to be one whole person, whether I am called upon for help in a relationship deemed to be client-centered or in one that is labeled person-centered. I work in the same way in each.

What did Rogers mean when he said that he worked in the same way in each situation? Did the same empathy exist in his sympathetic and caring gestures toward that woman sobbing in the individual therapy interview; as in his cool brashness toward that young "hippy" pointing his finger in the small group, accusing Rogers of betraying "the revolution"; as in his suppressed yawning while that smug university professor was droning on about Sartre and philosophies of liberty in the large group meeting?

Although his apparent reaction, his manner of expression, his feelings, the circumstances may have been different in each of these situations, I believe that Rogers **approached** them in the very same way. He approached each situation with the same desire to understand, the same good humor, the same humility, the same honesty, the same non-judgmental acceptance of the individual or the group, the same curiosity and openness to learning, the same will to act constructively. He improvised from his knowledge and abilities in each specific case.

The development of effective client-centered therapy has resulted in the formulation of certain *principles*. Some have become part of the theory, some part of the belief system of practitioners, some part of the folklore that inevitably surrounds the activities of a group of people involved in the same endeavor. For the approach, there are no principles as such.

In the case of client-centered therapy, the approach was characteristically expressed through an intense *empathic understanding* within a *genuine* person-to-person relationship, where the therapist *accepted*, without question or judgment, the client's thoughts and feelings.

### APPLYING THE APPROACH VS. APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES OF CLIENT-CENTERED THERAPY

Rogers's major descriptions of client-centered therapy (for example, 1946, 1951, 1961, 1980) always included developments in education and groups. In his book, *Client-Centered Therapy*, these subjects were put under the heading of "applications of therapy." However, it is clear from the descriptions of "student-centered teaching" and "group-centered leadership" that these activities are substantially different from client-centered therapy. Nevertheless, the attitudes and orientation (that is, the **approach**) of the educator and the group leader is the same. So, what is

more likely being presented are not applications of therapy, but applications of the approach itself.

By the time he described, "A Theory of Therapy, Personality, and Interpersonal Relationships," for Koch's (1959) *Psychology: A Study of Science*, Rogers had already begun to distinguish between applications of therapy and applications of the underlying approach that the therapy was based on. In this case, he called the approach, "the Client-Centered *Framework*."

It is important not to confuse "applying principles of therapy" and "applying the approach they have been based on." In applying the principles of therapy one is doing what one "knows" how to do. In doing so, it may be difficult to avoid therapeutic goals. Thus, in trying to demonstrate the principles of empathic understanding, congruence and non-judgmental acceptance in the classroom, a teacher runs the risk of turning a good opportunity for learning into a bad session of therapy. Education, not psychotherapy is the goal. (If the education is also therapeutic, so much the better. But this should not be the primary motive.)

Applying principles instead of meeting the phenomenon on its own terms may not only be ineffective in achieving one's objectives, it may even be harmful. There is evidence that two large projects based on "models" and principles derived from client-centered therapy may not have been as successful as they could have been. One project was the attempt to modify a private school system (Coulson, 1989). The other was an attempt to resolve conflict between groups (Wood, 1994).

#### *An example from encounter groups*

"Attending" each person with "empathic responses," has become for many the customary method of client-centered therapy. This may also be effective for some group participants. It may also be ineffective for some persons. Generally speaking, group participants will not at first tolerate such methods. Of course, for brief periods at the beginning of the group (or in the contrived structure of training or demonstration) it may be permitted. However, even in such cases, prolonged predictable responses from the facilitator, especially those practiced as a facilitative technique, will eventually be challenged by group members. "What about you?" they may demand. "Can you only repeat what we say? How do you feel? What do you think? Who are you?"

Most of all, perhaps, a *pattern* of Rogerian reflective statements or "focusing" advice is annoying. The following example illustrates this point. A participant trained in "communication skills," made what she regarded as a "facilitative response" to each person who spoke in the group. Following what each person said, she repeated the speaker's words, kindly offered some interpretation aimed at demonstrating empathy, and whenever possible, urged the speaker to "focus on his feelings." In spite of her apparent sincerity, the people she tried to "facilitate" promptly ignored her. The gentler speakers would pause until she had exhausted the intervention, then continue. After several such "reflective" interruptions, group participants became visibly annoyed. One irritated speaker asked her to shut up and mind her own business so that he could complete his thoughts.

Later, at the lunch table, she turned to Carl Rogers and said, "This group doesn't seem to appreciate being offered *accurate empathic responses*. Some say they like my effort to reflectively listen, but most of my interventions fall flat," Rogers swallowed a bite of salad and, after a moment's thought, replied diplomatically, "I think the group is challenging us to reach within ourselves for a *deeper empathy*."

How does one express a deeper empathy? In a way that is sensitive to the present reality. That could even be by reflecting feelings. Or perhaps in silence. Perhaps telling what may seem an

irrelevant story (see Bozarth, 1984). But probably not by thoughtlessly applying the principles of client-centered therapy or any other therapy.

This fact frequently surprises client-centered therapists who cannot believe that, with all their good intentions and conscious effort not to, they are nevertheless playing a role. Even Rogers himself who adopted the completely innocent posture of "trying to understand every single thing the person was saying," has been called to task for not saying "how you really feel" in a demonstration interview within a large group workshop. The "client" remarking on his impressions of the "therapy" just concluded, related:

I still feel that feeling of sort of a structured – I feel I'm being used. I think you follow your rule book, you know, and I'm sure that if you really let go, you'd sort of look at the heart of these things, you'd open up a bit more and wouldn't be so impassive. (Rogers, 1986, p.25)

Thus, applying the principles of client-centered therapy (in this case "empathic understanding") may not be effective in the group. In addition to confusing empathic understanding, novices in group work may also confuse the therapeutic principles of congruence and non-judgmental acceptance. Attempting to be congruent, they may be brash and impatient. Instead of accepting, they may be passive and inactive.

Naturally, when participants in the group have achieved a person-to-person relation with each other, anyone can be facilitative through "empathic understanding."

Applying the person-centered approach can, and often does, result in a "facilitative environment." This may mean being sensitive to interactions between participants which may be more constructive than those between facilitator and participant (Yalom, 1985). Even in individual therapy, empathic understanding has been shown to depend more on the client than on the therapist (Moos & McIntosh, 1970). In the group, perhaps this knowledge may be extended. It may even make sense to facilitate the client's own "capacity for empathic understanding," as it is apparently a better indicator of success than the facilitator's (Mente & Spittler, 1980).

*One of its secrets (due to lack of understanding) is that the person-centered approach functions best in situations where conventional methods (including applying the principles of client-centered therapy) have failed.*

#### *Applying the person-centered approach*

Applying the person-centered approach (as shown in the example of unemployed scientists that opened this discussion) means confronting a phenomenon (such as psychotherapy, classroom learning, encounter groups or large groups) with that certain "way of being" described earlier and which may also include not only respecting others, but being able to deal with hostility and skepticism. It may mean facing both the unknown and one's own fear and doubt. It may mean fighting for one's own ideas, but giving them up for better ones. It frequently requires an active patience: to allow various perspectives to become apparent before deciding, while, at the same time, not withholding one's vital participation while data is accumulating.

### **THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CLIENT-CENTERED THERAPY DOES NOT ADEQUATELY EXPLAIN APPLICATIONS OF THE PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH**

Although client-centered psychotherapy itself still seems to function effectively, applications of the person-centered approach to education, small groups for encounter and psychotherapy, large group workshops to improve transnational understanding, to facilitate conflict exploration, to learn the nature of culture and its formation have revealed shortcomings in client-centered

therapy's psychology. As it stands it does not provide adequate explanations for these phenomena and other current preoccupations.

*The victim-of-society myth*

The psychology of client-centered therapy revolves around the consciousness of self. In brief, society is seen to be the cause of the individual's problems. It distorts his or her personality. The natural tendency toward self-actualization is then released in a relationship with a client-centered therapist and the client may live closer to his or her "organismic" reality.

Rogers (1981) has insisted that he regarded, "members of the human species. . . as *essentially* constructive in their fundamental nature, but damaged by their experience." The idea that cultural influences were to blame for a client's problems was frequently the client's own perception of reality and therefore a perfectly legitimate hypothesis for the initiation of a therapeutic process.

Nevertheless, for group applications there are serious problems with this hypothesis. First, in the group the society is no longer an abstraction. In a manner of speaking, it is the group itself, being created moment-by-moment by participants. Sure, people may be damaged by the group-society. If so, however, there are only the participants themselves to blame. Each participant cannot be only a victim. Some must also be victimizers.

The psychology of client-centered therapy proposes that, in a relationship with a therapist, the client may revise his or her concept of self in accord with organismic experience. This revision is based in part on a reflection such as, "Am I living in a way that is deeply satisfying to me, and which truly expresses me?" (Rogers, 1961). There is nothing wrong with this. *Carpe Diem*.

There is no problem, that is, unless *your* "deep satisfaction" prevents any of your colleagues from living in this way also. Martin Buber (1960) expressed the suspicion of many by observing, "I have a lot of examples of man having become very very individual, very distinct of others, very developed in their such-and-suchness without being at all what I would like to call a man."

Indeed, although they may have become more confident individuals, people having completed client-centered therapy could not be shown to have gained more respect and acceptance for others (Gordon & Cartwright, 1954). However, participants in encounter groups from the person-centered approach apparently could be (Tausch, 1983).

The task in the group is not merely to reject the rules of "society" and live as one pleases. It is to create a society in which every member may live as much as possible in harmony with his or her organismic experience.

*The myth that the individual controls his or her own destiny*

Client-centered therapy's psychology includes the belief that people may be counted on to do the right thing and that people are always in charge of their own actions. It is clear that this is not entirely the case. In large group workshops, for example, it is common for participants to behave one way in the group meetings and later, when alone, to regret their actions. Juries and other social bodies sometimes reach decisions that each member voted for but were the individual to have acted, not as a "representative of the people" but, as a "private person," he or she may have decided to the contrary.

This phenomenon also occurs slightly differently, but even more regretfully, on a global scale. Urgent ecological problems have been created by many individuals unwittingly acting in concert. A major difficulty to resolving the problem is that nobody seems to want to give up their inexpensive food (which, in order to produce on a vast scale, wastes substantial soil, a principle patrimony of the planet), their automobile (whose exhaust pollutes the air they must breathe), their refrigerators or bug sprays (whose pressurized gases destroy the ozone, the planet's radiation

protection layer), their personal computers (whose fabrication byproducts are among the most toxic). The overall effect of this phenomenon is a marvel of cooperation, a well-organized and disciplined endeavor. The problem is that no central control exists. Millions of people (the majority with good intentions) conspire to create situations that no single individual admits that he or she wishes and whose solitary withdrawal accounts for practically nothing in changing the system.

Not only are our behaviors coordinated in this obscure way, but also our very biological functioning seems to be tied together in various ways. For example, Lynch (1985), from his researches relating speech with the cardiovascular system, concludes 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" (p. 276).

Placebo effect is another example of the organism reacting in certain predictable patterns while the governing mind produces all kinds of personal and, at times, fanciful explanations for what is taking place. Patients cured by placebos explain that, "When someone cares about you, you improve." Or, "To improve you must exert effort." Or, "You have within you the power to improve." Or, "Treatment is a reminder that you are trying to change yourself."

What is the placebo effect? Nobody seems to know. Nevertheless, patients improve by digesting chemicals that have been scientifically established as curative. (Although the drug's effectiveness may be further influenced by color [Shapiro, 1971]). Patients improve by ingesting completely inert materials. They may also improve when reassured and given a drug that is known to *cause* the very symptoms they suffer (Wolf, 1950). They improve even when they are *told* that the pills they will be given are "with no medicine, only sugar" (Park & Covi, 1965). When considering this subject, one should not forget the reports of *toxic side effects* caused by placebos (Beecher, 1955); and even more astonishing: *addiction* to placebo (Mintz, 1977). The data on placebo effect demonstrates for me that the governing mind does not fully grasp the complete reality in which it functions *and* that the total organism is capable of self-healing far beyond our current comprehension.

#### *The myth that individuals are rational and well-intentioned*

Individuals may be rational, but collectively they also continue to be tribal. We form into tribes of motorcyclists, football fans, rock music fanatics, professors in academic departments, religious congregations. Each has its own uniform, myths, rites of passage, jargon and so forth (Morris & Marsh, 1988). Much of the behavior in large group workshops can be seen to be tribal and should be understood as such in order to make sense out of group behavior.

And as far as good intention goes, history is full of examples of well-intentioned people who are quite capable of damaging others (Milgram, 1974).

#### *The myth that there is only one self*

William James (1896) recognized that "the mind seems to embrace a confederation of psychic entities." His observations were passed over for almost a century. However, today there is much talk of interactive "mental organs" or "modules" of mind. Quite a list of supposed modules has already accumulated. It includes one for face recognition, for spatial relations, for tool-use, for fear, for social exchange, for emotion-perception, as well as a "theory of mind" module (Barkow, Cosmides & Tooby, 1992).

The enormous variety of patterns of thought, varied emotional reactions to the same social situation in large group workshops also suggests a complexity that exceeds the limits of the concept of self proposed by the psychology of client-centered therapy.

Research of thinking patterns confirms that we may indeed use "modules of mind" to confront certain kinds of experience. However, these studies also suggest that the wrong module may be selected to deal with a problem better suited to another. Furthermore, modules may be "triggered" by certain behaviors of others, even by the phrases they use, and even by certain words (See Cialdini, 1985, for many examples). This view also explains why a person may act and feel completely to the contrary when within a group meeting and when solitary, all the time feeling that he or she is a single entity.

Furthermore, there is "divided consciousness," phenomena of the mind that, though largely unrecognized, have enormous influence on behavior. For example, Hefferline, Keenan & Harford (1959) have shown that individuals may be "conditioned" to perform certain tasks without any conscious awareness whatever of anything at all having taken place. Perhaps more astonishing still is the "hidden observer" discovered by Hilgard (1977). There is apparently an entity that may communicate with the outside world without the governing self having any knowledge of its presence, nor its interactions.

In a small volume of lectures, James (1896) has described various "exceptional mental states." Among the subjects he has discussed are dreams, hypnotism, automatism, multiple personality, demonical possession, witchcraft, insanity and genius. James (1890) also admitted that a person "has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their minds."

Similar phenomena are readily verified in large group workshops and are not easily, if at all, accounted for in the theory of client-centered therapy.

*The myth that historical psychological factors are the only significant influences on consciousness*

The various "exceptional mental states," though perhaps difficult for many to accept, are not as astonishing as other subtle, though significant, influences.

For example, an ugly, crowded room can provoke "monotony, fatigue, headache, sleep, discontent, irritability, hostility and avoidance" in inhabitants (Mintz, 1956). Not only does a beautiful room have opposite effects. Ulrich (1984) has evidence that a view of natural beauty from a hospital room may facilitate recovery from surgery.

The geometry and function of the space may also have an effect on consciousness and even determine behavior (Barker, 1968).

Obviously, the presence of other people also have an effect on an individual's consciousness. In psychotherapy interviews conducted within a large group, the group itself may have as much influence as the therapist (Slack, 1985; Rogers 1986).

Seasonal changes in light have been shown to effect the mood of some persons (Rosenthal et al., 1984). Colors, music, scents also influence consciousness. Even eating a meal may effect a person's judgment (Razran, 1938).

Positive ions in certain weather fronts and in polluted air may provoke irritability, migraine headaches, nausea and respiratory congestion. While the inhalation of small negative ions, found near waterfalls, glacial peaks and unpolluted beaches, not only reverses these symptoms but also may provoke inspirational experiences (Kreuger & Reed, 1976).

Low frequency magnetic fields, such as those surrounding high tension electrical lines and personal computers are suspected of effecting the memory and sense of time of those exposed (Brodeur, 1989).

Not only mere personal comfort is at stake here. These phenomena influence the consciousness in the same subtle manner in which psychotherapy functions. Thus, they are highly relevant to the practice of psychology. Understanding these effects is especially relevant to studying applications of the person-centered approach because, in certain cases, they may have more to do with a participant's experience than the "facilitative" methods used.

### **TOWARD A PSYCHOLOGY FOR APPLICATIONS OF THE PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH**

William James (1890) considered psychology as, "the science of mental life, both of its phenomena and their conditions." In his classic text, he addressed among other things the subjects of stream of thoughts, consciousness of self, attention, concepts, discrimination and comparison, association, perception of time, space and of things, memory, sensation, imagination, perception of reality, reasoning, instinct, emotions, will, and exceptional mental states. Any psychology should address at least these subjects.

Considering the broad range of questions raised by applications of the person-centered approach, it would be both appropriate to current realities and consistent with the historical trend of Rogers's thinking regarding "organismic experience" to base a psychology for these applications on evolutionary biology.

Perhaps something along the lines of "evolutionary psychology" (Cosmides, Tooby & Barkow, 1992) might be a promising starting point for developing this psychology. Thus, it would assume there is a universal human nature, not as expressed through various cultures but, at the level of evolved psychological mechanisms which are adaptations brought about by hundreds of millions of years of natural selection. Also, it would assume that our present human body and brain – and therefore, mind – adapted to the way of life of Pleistocene hunter-gatherers over some two million years.

The social adaptations also evolved over millions of years of nomadic life but may no longer be suited for the social conditions that began only a few thousand years ago and are now changing at a mind-boggling pace. There has not been enough time for evolution to work its wonders on our minds in this short time. The few thousand years since the outset of agriculture and the beginning of "modern" culture is less than 1% of evolutionary time.

Although our explanations to the contrary may be inventive, we may continue to be governed by certain, for the most part harmless (though at times destructive), adaptations from this substantial history. We can refuse to obey these tribal adaptations only with difficulty. To enter in trance in order to learn from spirits of the dead, to envision directions for a desperate people, or go to war, may be a mere step away from painting the face and throwing oneself into a frenzy for a football match. Firelight dances in the middle of the forest and sideline theater at the Silverdome stadium may both be the result of the same adaptation. Motorcycle gangs and high society, in choosing their uniforms, may both be motivated by the same impulse. "Movements," religious, popular, or whatever may be seen as attempts to incentivate the group to "centralize," "intensify the will," in order to "move on."

A biological basis for a psychology also would link the mysterious placebo effect (which both biology and psychology have confronted without being able to explain), as well as the various environmental influences on human consciousness: negative ions in the air, the amount of sunlight, low-frequency magnetic fields, planetary orbits. Both the geometry of the local space and the geographic place influence consciousness. This should not be difficult to explain within this theoretical framework proposed.

Finally, individual "psychological mechanisms" also fit conveniently into this orientation. "Material denied to awareness," "defenses," and so forth (Rogers, 1959), may be seen to have developed to deal with the necessities of survival in the hunter-gatherer existence. For example, "denial" may have been very useful for a people who had to cooperate for survival, had to move on quickly and had little opportunity to deal with personal differences or with living in a way that was "truly satisfying." (See Nesse & Lloyd, 1992, for discussion of this aspect.) Under present conditions, it may be unconstructive.

These speculations suggest powerful explanations for why, at the same time we are convincing ourselves to the contrary, there are forces over which we seem to have no control; for why tribal adaptations appropriate for thousands of years ago persist in marginal ways; for why we may be various people, while believing we are but one.

Nevertheless, we should not be overly impressed with these insights. We should take time to test these perspectives, to investigate, to reflect, to learn. A point of view such as this may offer powerful explanations for large blocks of phenomena. However, history suggests that the more powerful a theory is, the more care that must be taken in its use. Remember the epidemics, not only in psychology, sociology and anthropology, but also in art and literature that followed Freud's powerful psychological explanations. Mercifully, most of the more ridiculous have now been retired. Nevertheless, tentativeness should also be part of a person-centered approach when crafting theories.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This example has been chosen as an illustration of what an application of the person-centered approach may be like because of its clarity and brevity. Also, because it involves *groups*, which so many of the more recent applications of the person-centered approach do. However, the best example of a successful application of the person-centered approach is, of course, client-centered therapy. The study of the history and development of this application is highly recommended.

<sup>2</sup> Some people seem to like the idea that we might cultivate this *way of being* as a way of life, encountering every kind of day-to-day situation with this attitude and posture. It may be possible. However, I am suspicious of such utopian desires, especially when they are connected to such limited psychological systems. This posture does not need to be a way of life, it need only be capable of being applied effectively in situations that may improve life for many others.

<sup>3</sup> The complete understanding of consciousness may never yield to "biological" explanation. Although formidable reductionistic efforts have been made to provide strictly biological explanation, they have yet to be convincing. (See Crick, 1994, for the latest and most uncompromising.)

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