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The “reality” of the person.

Some radical considerations of the person-centred approach.¹

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Abstract

*The question what “reality” actually is, would be labelled as one of the “unanswerable questions” by constructivist Heinz von Foerster, with the answer revealing nothing about “reality”, but lots about our basic assumptions and beliefs and their influence on our practice. **Carl Rogers**, the founder of the person-centred approach, has clearly decided on an answer. He argues tirelessly in his life’s work in favour of a first step of **radical tolerance**: at first always try to accept and understand what the client’s reality and his/her understanding of the world look like. Then consider carefully, how I create my own “realities”. Then – only then! – “proceed”: work at the edge of awareness, create a dialogue between each other for the purpose of change, healing and growth in psychotherapy, for the purpose of consensus-building and creativity in the political and social field.*

I make a case in this paper that we need to explore all these different realities fully (including giving attention to their physical dimensions) and then, as a next step, expand on the traditional individual-centred nature of the person-centred approach: maybe a shift in perspective from egocentricity to relationality and a revision of the term “self” could be useful to the “reality” in the late 20th century in which we live.

Introduction

Out of the main theme of this Congress: “Myth – Dream – Reality”, I want to look more closely at the section of “reality”. As a starting point I have chosen one of my favourite quotes by Carl R. Rogers:

It appears to me that the way of the future must be to base our lives and our education on the assumption that there are as many realities as there are persons, and that our highest priority is to accept that hypothesis and proceed from there.

This comes from an article written by Rogers in 1978 entitled “Do we need “a” reality?” which was probably originally intended only for private distribution and was directed mainly at educators.²

This quote, along with the entire article, had always pleased me and still pleases me now.

The concept that “there are as many realities as there are persons”, is now a commonplace in those sciences which have differentiated concepts of reality. However, I am not so sure that it is a commonplace in the overall field of psychotherapy. And even if it were so, this fundamental assumption often gets lost in trivialisation (“Yes, yes, of course, people are different”), which undermines radical nature of this worldview.

I suspect that people's first encounter with Roger's philosophy is often as described by Rachel Rosenberg in her book³, that they show spontaneous agreement and a first spark of recognition, followed by logical contradictions or disconcertion: Can answers be as elementary as Rogers delivers them?

Robert Kegan also criticised Rogers because "on an explanatory level, he would rather spread warmth than light".⁴

So I will try to clarify, in all its accuracy and precision, what a sustainable and profound reorientation can occur, if we take this approach seriously and let it be a true way of life.

1. What R. says about "reality"

In his article "Do we need "a" reality?", Rogers explores the question of the "real world" in which we live, which to us initially appears fixed and real, but a closer inspection and increased understanding makes it begin to lose its solidity. The same goes for the whole of the universe and objects as well as interpersonal relationships, dreams and "unreal" phenomena. He writes:

"Where have my thoughts led me in relation to an objective word of reality?

It clearly does not consist in the objects we can see and feel or hold.

It does not exist in the technology we admire so greatly.

It is not found in the solid earth or the twinkling stars.

It does not lie in a solid knowledge of those around us.

It is not found in the organisations or customs or rituals of any culture.

It is not even in our own known personal worlds.

It must take into account mysterious and currently unfathomable "separate realities", incredibly different from an objective world.

*I, and many others, have come to a new realization. It is this: The only reality I can possibly know, is the world as **I** perceive and experience it at the moment. The only reality you can possibly know is the world as **you** perceive and experience it at this moment. And the only certainty is that those perceived realities are different. **There are as many "real worlds" as there are people!** This creates a most burdensome dilemma...*

No longer can we exist in a secure cocoon, knowing that we all see the world in the same way. Because of this change, I want to raise a very serious question: Can we today afford the luxury of having "a" reality? Can we still preserve the belief that there is a "real world" upon whose definition we all agree? I am convinced that this is a luxury we cannot afford, a myth we dare not maintain.

...

Our attempt, then, to live in the "real world" which all perceive in the same way have in my opinion, led us to the brink of annihilation as a species. I will be so bold as to suggest an alternative:

It appears to me that the way of the future must be to base our lives and our education on the assumption that there are as many realities as there are persons, and that our highest priority is to accept that hypothesis and proceed from there.

Proceed where? Proceed, each of us, to explore open-mindedly the many, many perceptions of reality that exist. We would, I believe, enrich our own lives in the process. We would also become more able to cope with the reality in which each one of us exists, because we would be aware of many more options. This might well be a life full of perplexity and difficult choices, demanding maturity, but it would be an exciting and adventurous life. The question my well be raised, however, whether we could have a community or a society on this hypothesis of multiple realities. Might not such a society be a completely individualistic anarchy? That is not my opinion.

Suppose my grudging tolerance of your separate word view became a full acceptance of you and your right to have such a view. Suppose that instead of shutting of the realities of others as absurd or dangerous or heretical or stupid, I was willing to explore and learn about those realities? Suppose you were willing to do the same? What would be the social result?

I think that our society would be based not on a blind commitment to a cause or creed or a view of reality, but on a common commitment to each other as right-fully separate persons, with separate realities. The natural human tendency to care for another would no longer be: "I care for you because you are the same as I " but instead: "I prize and treasure you because you are different from me."

(...)

*I have stated that we are wiser than our intellects, that our organisms as a whole have a wisdom and purposiveness which goes well beyond our conscious thought. I believe that this idea applies to the concepts I have been presenting in this chapter. I think that men and women, individually and collectively, are inwardly and organismically rejecting the view of one single, culture-approved reality. I believe that they are moving inevitably toward the acceptance of millions of separate, challenging, exciting, informative, **individual** perceptions of reality.*

If we accept as a basic fact of all human life that we live in separate realities; if we can see those differing as the most promising resource for learning in all the history of the world,

if we can live together in order to learn from one another without fear; if we can do all this, – then a new age could be dawning.

2. Three reasons for the relevance of “accept this hypothesis” and “then proceed from there”

For me, the easiest way I could sum up the relevance that Roger’s text has, is using the two key words “**first**” and “**then**”. For me, here lies the essential idea, the basic belief system of our approach: Firstly, we always have to understand and accept the realities of others before we can begin to proceed in any direction. And: this first step does not just mean ‘once and then never again’, but: again and again, in each and every moment of encounter.

a) I begin with the **personal** reasons why I like this article:

The therapeutic approach one chooses often has to do with a very personal predisposition, a personal question or fascination. Otherwise it would not be interesting and effective for a long professional life.

The topic “what is real?” has always interested me. Whether something is really true, - really, really? Whether someone really means it when he says something. Whether I feel what I feel, and mean what I mean? My early fascination for communication, for interaction, for translating – how people can understand and misunderstand each other - all these were and are important issues for me.

In the words of Gene Gendlin, this is a structure-bound way of thinking, feeling, behaving; a specific characteristic of my inner organisation, which I share with many other people but not with all- they have their structureboundness in different places.

Many phenomena, manifestations and constellations for me seemed to be volatile, blurred, often hazy, only slightly contoured and always changing, when taking in other people’s opinions and viewpoints. Because it could always be otherwise and all perceptions could have some merit, it has long been difficult to find my own clear and firm viewpoint, one that could remain valid for longer periods. The harmless question “Yes, now what do **you** really mean?” plunged me into deep confusion, it could often only be answered in a felt-sense-way (also an expression from Gendlin for the implicit, unclear sense of ‘something’), rather atmospheric-mood-like, not yet formed.

I instinctively chose the person-centred approach because it seemed to ensure that as a therapist, I was allowed to follow the process, pursue my interest and curiosity to find out - together with my clients -what their realities were. As a client I was allowed to, and should, really find out my own reality.

Talents and limitations are often close together.

So, whilst learning this approach, I became aware that I rather abundantly possessed the “gullibility” which Rogers often claims⁶: that it was not difficult to find interest, empathic understanding and acceptance for all the different worlds of people that I encountered. I quickly learnt that a word or a gesture used by two persons by no means denotes the same thing. And what somebody truly thinks and feels in his/her private world was always a surprise. Asking sincerely; “How is it in your world? How exactly? How, in contrast to...?” became a kind of automatic reaction that replaced the rash head nodding of “oh yeah, I understand...”. The practice of empathy became easier and more diverse.

But getting to know and stay with my own reality was far more difficult. Even as a client it was extremely difficult for me to find something to formulate, give shape to, retain it a little and then to find it again. The hardest part was to do all this in the presence of another person! Not automatically to be inclined to her with all my senses, to feel, guess, inquire about her reactions, to orientate myself to these reactions, but instead to remain with myself and to find my own way of being – this was at the beginning an almost impossible task. It then became one of my biggest challenges, as I began to understand what congruence actually meant: to be clearly and precisely connected to myself, and to my experiencing in the relationship with the other person, and to communicate this understanding depending on its appropriateness. I understood that **I**, a real formed human being, had to be there in order to create an “us”, and not somebody who makes herself invisible and dissolves in misplaced empathy and acceptance.

b) As a **practitioner** this article also pleases me:

I became and stayed a client-centred psychotherapist, with increasing conviction, and for 20 years I have been training people in this approach. I don't know of any other theory of therapy, which starts so radically from the individual, which tries to understand and accept unconditionally, with such a deep respect towards the fundamental differences between persons. I know of no other theory that so clearly obliges us as therapists to encounter ourselves in the same way, to explore and accept ourselves, our talents and our limitations, and to bring our abilities towards the benefit of an encounter. It always irritates me when this attitude is trivialised and belittled, reduced to a superficial "starting point", before the real and "deeper" therapy begins.

Honestly embodying empathy, acceptance and congruence is not so easy. It is not just a "growth-enhancing climate", as it is often mistakenly described, that the therapist "provides", but rather - unlike a thermostat - the therapist is a person who is present in a relationship, and just like the client, is exposing himself/herself to a process of 'being changed'. The process is mutual, reciprocal, and fundamentally a dialogue⁷. In my favourite quote from Rogers, he says that the first condition of the act of listening 'is courage'⁸. Every reaction from my client changes my way of being present in this relationship; hence I am risking being changed myself! This is to a large extent a learnable craft, but to a larger extent a very radical understanding of the idea of the human being and of the formation of relationships, which requires presence and commitment, discipline and courage.

c) Thirdly, as an epistemologist, this article pleases me due to its close proximity to radical constructivism.

This closeness "is" of course not simply like this. As far as I know Rogers has never known the representatives of radical constructivism. I, as a reader, produce this conceptual closeness, I am a "constructor" - and I'm not the only one, for Peter Frenzel and Christian Fehringer have documented the "constructivist core of the personality theory of Carl Rogers" with examples.⁹

The fundamental constructivist principle is that: "The reader, and not the writer, defines the meaning of the written word", and from this point of view phrases such as "The organism reacts to the field of perception, as it is experienced and perceived. This field of perception is "reality" to the individual..." or "I do not react to any absolute reality, but to my perception of reality"¹⁰ are very close to the basic assumptions of radical constructivism. I will summarise them briefly:

- Reality is not a representation/reproduction of something outside of us "out there" in us "inside". No meanings or qualities live in things, waiting to be "discovered" by us.
- Reality is widely "invented" and constructed by us, i.e. we produce reality in an act of perception and through our actions. An observer-independent reality is not simply just "there", we cannot – and this is an important clarification - make statements about the ontological and existential nature of the world. We live "structurally coupled" with others, with our "environment", but we are subjective in our description of the section of that reality which we inhabit.

- Constructivism is therefore an epistemological theory, which makes epistemological statements, but not ontological ones.
- The “environment” can irritate or “perturb”, but it cannot determine me, because too much is ruled by my own system which cannot help operating this or the other way and then, depending on the degree of the “perturbation”, I might need to relearn to think and act differently. And it is exactly the same when this is reversed: however we intend to influence others, there is no “instructive interaction”, no Nuremberg funnel, because the meaning of what was said takes shape in the other person according to his/her own reality.

Applied to therapy this means: The client’s system decides on the effectiveness of the intervention, not the intervention itself.

But this does not mean that what we do with others is random, -on the contrary. Within a certain limited space of freedom we have a range of choices about how we create our reality—and how we do this together with others. Marianne Krüll writes in the preface to “Sprache, Struktur und Wandel”¹¹ about her 20 year experience with this approach:

“I was electrified by the thought that I could regard the reality “out there” as a product of my senses, of my nervous system, my symbolising skills, more so: that my reality is also to ‘be-taken-as-true’ by other people with their own senses, their own nervous systems and their own representational models. (...)

When I dwelt on this idea and applied it to my everyday life it seemed that “the” reality was no longer a firm reference point for me. My reality was not necessarily the same as the reality of my fellow human beings. The variety of possible realities presented itself as an entirely new challenge to create in my own life and in political and socio-cultural environment shared realities with other people. If I seriously assumed that we had to come to an agreement about a reality that should be “real”, then I, and those who create this agreed reality with me, must carry the responsibility for our construction”

Do you hear the similarities to Rogers? And perhaps already the differences?

In any case: constructivism both freed me from all questions about “true reality” and answered them at the same time. The fact that you’ll never find out what reality **is** (the ontological question), but only **experience** the world as our own reality, from our individual point of view (epistemology) makes asking the ontological question pointless and creates a new freedom.

3. Exploring fully the realities of others

Actually, within the person-centred approach I do not have to plead for this first step, because it goes without saying. Still, it seems to me that sometimes in our trainings and our practice only a part of the person’s reality (the one that was important to Carl Rogers) is in the foreground – and I wonder why this is so.

All school-founders, I suppose, generalise their personal insights and experiences. From their own perspective they describe which omission, which suppression, which non-consideration is responsible for the suffering of their clients (or of people in general): for example the suppression of sexuality, or the inhibition of creativity, or the lack of appreciation, or the repression of autonomy, or the repression of the unconscious, or the exclusion of spirituality...

So too did Carl Rogers have his own perspective. He evidently preferred themes like seeking for personal meaning, for appreciation, acceptance, autonomy, for authentic expression in language and feelings. These are all traditional topics in the PCA, and this is what Rogers surely means, when he speaks of “exploring” the different realities.

Now, within the PCA, it seems to me that there has been little further development since Rogers’ day in terms of the “sections” of the person we can explore as his/her reality

From my point of view (that of course means: in **my** generalisation!) the following themes are not explored fully:

- a) There is no obvious presence of the body in either the theory or in the discussion of the therapeutic relationship
- b) There is a kind of disregard of those aspects of the person which involve thoughts and action, aspects which, for some clients, are crucial
- c) There is no attempt, not even tentatively, to systematise the very different realities of people and our resonance to them - maybe out of a fear of “diagnosing” them?

If there is already such a radical willingness to explore and accept the reality of each other, then we should do it completely. “Completely” means: not limited to those parts the founders of an approach had in the forefront of their minds.

I want to say some words about those parts of people’s realities, which, in my opinion, are neglected.

a) The body

Rogers himself hasn’t excluded the body. His concept, his theory is wide enough . We find phrases and terms such as ‘organismic’, ‘the organism as a whole’, the ‘fluid and mutable Self’, ‘organismic trust’, and even a description of how the therapist must embody and convey the basic attitudes towards the client¹². Within the humanistic tradition in general concepts are holistic and not meant to exclude a part of the person.

Jochen Eckert, a German colleague, talks of body psychotherapy as ‘the application of the client-centred approach’¹³. Gene Gendlin has at least included the ‘situational body’ in his theory.

It seems to me that the PCA still finds it difficult to include the bodily presence of the client and of the therapist and the interaction between them. We often cause raised eyebrows, criticism, doubts, anxiety and a lack of understanding when we talk about our client-centred body-psychotherapy.

Of course, Rogers did not give us special interventions about working with the body. But neither did he give instructions on how exactly to talk to our clients!

So as we have to learn how to listen and what to say to our clients we have to learn to look at their bodies, and to find words for what we see. We could suggest to our clients how to be sensitive to bodily reactions and sensations.

Of course this sort of encounter requires knowledge. But working with the body in a client-centred way can be developed, learnt and taught precisely. Sometimes we have, as Brian Thorne puts it, ‘to befriend our bodies’¹ first. We have to learn something about breathing, posture and movement, about the various forms of connectedness between topics and their bodily expression. Any minor changes during therapy, whenever or wherever they surface, have to be integrated into the body, have to find a form of embodiment - while a new physical configuration of feelings and thoughts allows new ways of behaving and relating.

And we as therapists: Where else other than in our bodies can ‘embody’ empathy, acceptance, congruence and we? Feel the resonance, the “between”? We have to learn to feel our own bodies and its resonances, and to sense into our “situational bodies”.

Following on from this, even working with touch and with physical encounter is possible without leaving the basic ground of the person-centred approach.

My criticism, that entire theories are based only on the verbal side of expression also applies to constructivism, with its emphasis on the narrative, the ‘healing through words’ (Ludewig)¹. I have found one exception recently, the feminist, sociologist and constructivist Marianne Krüll, whom I have quoted above. In her paper ‘Recursive Thoughts Regarding Radical Constructivism and Feminism’¹, she argues explicitly in favour of ‘...not only grasping our cognitive, verbal and conscious thoughts and actions as consensual constructivism, but also to be able to describe our common sensory experiences as con-“sensual” in the purest sense of the word’. The embodiment of our sensory experiences is, according to her, the basis of our cognitive abilities.

As an example she chooses the difference between genders. ‘...compared to boys, girls rarely engage in physical brawling, and so our female body constitutes itself differently from that of the male gender, which can be used to explain the different cognitive forms ...we can describe how men and women do not live in the same world, how our senses were structured differently during the course of our socialization, how they were constituted. ...’ This process isn’t complete, however, as further changes can possibly happen later on in life, ‘as the construction of our sensory world is forever changeable, we just need new sensual experiences to cause a change in our realities’.

I wish for such a natural presence of the body in our theory and in our practice. Even the traditional exogenous, psychoanalytical approaches have a branch which is oriented towards the body, and during a talk with Daniel Stern^o, a psychologist who specializes in infant development, he stated that ‘Now the time is ripe to bring the body back’.

b) Thoughts and Action/Behaviour

I wonder whether the Pendulum that undoubtedly swung away from thinking in favour of feelings during the time Rogers created his theory will eventually have to swing back? Our clients, who have their main modality in the field of thoughts and thinking, often feel harassed and not ‘accepted’ by therapists who work with an overemphasis on feelings. They don’t

know how to answer when they are asked ‘How do you feel’, “What do you feel about this?”, “What are your feelings”?

Separating the process of thinking from the overall organism is a bypass, like any separating act is, when I try to understand my client’s reality empathically. It is absolutely necessary ‘to understand the cognitive realities that clients construct for themselves’²¹. ‘To observe the act of thinking as it happens’, is an exciting and necessary discipline²², as David Bohm puts it in his contributions to his method of “dialogue”.

The same applies to the realm of acting and behaviour. Feeling understood and accepted in their feelings, our clients do not go out and automatically act and behave in a different way. The manner of behaving naturally belong to a person’s reality and can be explored and altered during therapy, and for some of our clients behaving in a different way can be the first step towards feeling differently.

c) Patterns, typologies

Could it be possible in a very individual-based approach to nevertheless make generalisations about some ways of being?

Rogers has always encouraged his colleagues to go on with research. For him, research means to consider each new experience, to systematize them tentatively, and put them up for discussion .

Often I miss this curiosity and this kind of research in the PCA when it comes to the recurring stereotypical patterns our clients fall into and our own reactions to them. In a whole organism there are always different ‘sub-systems’: those which have a more flowing, ephemeral and changeable character, and on the other hand, those which are more rigid, stereotyped, fixed and stable, and cause harm to the individual and their surroundings. ‘It is always like this’ is what our clients then say, or they move in a specific manner or relate in their friendships in the same way over and over again. This is what Gendlin calls ‘frozen wholes’ or ‘structure bound behaviour’²⁴.

I would strongly suggest developing an interest in the formation and recurrence of these patterns and recognising and describing them. We perceive such patterns in ourselves and in our clients, but normally we will classify them according to our own ‘private system’ and won’t talk about it to our colleagues, so that these internal “classifications” and helpful observations which would help us to understand our clients and ourselves better don’t ever become consensual.

Throughout 30 years of experience with clients and trainees in our training institute, GFK, we gradually developed typologies which we call ‘character structure’, and we have also classified ‘styles of bonding’²²

The typical way in which a client enters into a relationship with a therapist, how she responds to him and what kind of interaction arises between them, can then be described with the help of these typologies during professional reflection and supervision.

Typologies as we understand them belong to a ‘Normathology’, not to a ‘Pathology’. The term “structure bound” is a neutral one; it is about form rather than content. It says nothing about illness or disorder, but something about one-sidedness, about not being in process. The question when something leaves the so called ‘normal field’ is not to answer as such. It could

only be understood from a relational perspective: in comparison with what... / with respect to what... / as measured by ...

The great advantage to our approach is that we don't learn any 'sets of diagnosis' and then attribute them externally to our clients. We discover and name together these life-preserving and life-preventing patterns and habits through precise and patient questioning and exploring, through listening, and allowing them to be between us in therapy: this is empathy as it is understood by Rogers.

All of us have special aspects and ways of relating that are one-sided. These aspects are always both: talents and limitations, strengths and weaknesses. And all of us, I think, as professionals, have to be aware of these parts, because they influence how we act in relationships and the way we think and feel and behave in our work.

In the beginning, it is always a big surprise for our trainees how different are the worlds we live in. They are puzzled: 'Oh really, this is not the way all people think?' Or: 'oh, there are others who react like I do?' There is irritation ('what, not everyone is like that?'), astonishment ('unbelievable, so different!') and increasing relief ('ahh, that's how it is with me'). To find 'neighbours' and become aware of others who live on completely different 'planets' and to find resonance to the different forms and manifestations of structure-boundness leads to a very enriching experience. It touches me again and again how much this process of learning and becoming familiar with patterns helps with living and coexisting together. Not "*I care for you because you are the same as I*" but instead: "*I prize and treasure you because you are different from me*". Rogers writes in his essay.

To be able to make choices rather than always repeating the same patterns, and to practise these choices, will lead to a significant feeling of freedom and to different quality relationships.

4. Proceeding

Once we have accepted that we inhabit different realities where do we go from there?

Rogers questions "*whether we could have a community or a society on this hypothesis of multiple realities*" and, being an optimist, he comes to the conclusion that these would not be ruled by anarchy, but by 'learning from one another other without fear'.

I'd really like to be able to believe this and I have done so for some time, but recently I have not been quite so sure. This is due to changed experiencing and a modified understanding of the concept of 'me', the Self, the individual.

We live in an individual-centred culture and we must take this into account. In other parts of the world there are cultures in which concepts such as 'self' and 'individual' have an entirely different meaning, or cultures whose language doesn't even include these concepts. There some of the 'disorders', that are very common in our culture and which Rogers has been focusing on, are unknown. The Dalai Lama, for example, seemed to be amazed at the phenomenon of 'poor self-esteem' in our Western culture.

Maureen O'Hara, a Californian colleague, describes this as 'the modern heritage':

"...the notion that a person stands in the centre of the world with a self and an inner self which you can turn to. This concept involves considering people as monadic, self-centred, and

autonomously acting, separated from others through their identity, as beings torn out from their context .”

Watts also defined our individual selves as ‘skin-encapsulated ego’, and Gregory Bateson describes this view as ‘the fundamental error of our Western civilisation’.

But as we live and work in this culture and this society, we have start at the place where we are. Stubbornly socialized in the concept that we are separate beings, we must begin with the individual and recognize the impact that this has on our living. Gene Gendlin describes the consequences of this way of thinking like this:

The Encounter Movement and all that led to it undoubtedly changed our society. Today one hears ordinary people talk of interior experience and inter-personal relations in ways that only psychologists and clients near the end of therapy ever talked of before^{1 9}

But from my experience the long-term consequences of such a self-centred culture are becoming increasingly worrying.

Is it not necessary to make a reversal, or change one’s viewpoint?

Buber’s criticism that humanistic psychology individualizes the human being, but doesn’t humanize him, is a concept worth considering. And a change in viewpoint beyond ‘humanity’ towards the non-human world, abandoning the anthropocentric viewpoint, is only in its infancy.

a) Relational Empathy

Everywhere in Rogers’ work we can find that the ‘aim’ of growth includes the following qualities: to become detached, to outgrow something, to become independent, to become autonomous, to be responsible for one’s self.

This is a very one-sided image of humanity, but it was understandable in its time when it was above all about defending ones ‘self’ against a restricting authority, questioning suppressive hierarchical circumstances, overriding the power of the expert. Even though this might still be true for some areas of life today, in the new Millennium there is a demand for other qualities: such as acting and thinking together in a committed, joined-up, relational, socio-centric and interdependent manner.

American pragmatic individualism insists on the uniqueness and self-responsibility of the individual and degrades the 'environment' (and also other relations, including nature and the whole social field) to a favourable or unfavourable breeding ground for the development of the individual.

In accordance with this, children were and are seen as ‘victims’ of their social circumstances. Consequently, in our approach Rogers’s basic variables were often misunderstood as a growth promoting ‘climate’, which the therapist must provide so that the client can make so- called correcting experiences. Accordingly, even most of the encounter groups define themselves in our approach as places in which individuals can experience themselves, with others, together

¹ Gendlin 1992 /1998

with others, and with support from others, but they experience themselves, above all, as individuals.

When I support the theory of a 'climate' that can favour or hinder personal growth, I maintain a one-sided view. I can benefit from a 'climate' or I can fall victim to it, I can adapt it or I can evade it. But it will not occur to me, that I myself have an effect on my environment, that I am part of the interaction, that my actions always have consequences! °

I consider therapy incomplete if I look at the 'growth-promoting climate' in too narrow a sense. In the last few years I have begun to ask myself: what is it exactly that clients learn in client-centred psychotherapy? They learn that they can develop under certain conditions, that they can believe in themselves again, and that they can trust their "actualizing tendency". If all goes well, through empathy from others they will come to self-empathy, and through acceptance from others they will come to self-acceptance.

But will they also learn to empathize with others and accept them? Will they learn how to develop their congruence in their relationships with other people? Having been fully understood, are they encouraged to question what to do with their structure-bound patterns, their own-one-sidedness? Are they encouraged to consider the effect these aspects of themselves have on the world, on people around them? How might they become a part of a larger being? Are they encouraged to actively learn about other ways of thinking and feeling, and behaviour that doesn't only serve a purpose for themselves, but also for others, and for the world?

What I mean is that we shouldn't let clients leave therapy as egocentric beings who have only learnt that they can develop within certain given conditions, but cannot change in their relationships with others. I was very relieved when two years ago in an essay by Maureen O'Hara I found a plea to abandon this egocentrism in favour of a **relational empathy**. She wrote:

'For the full potential of therapeutic relationships as contexts in which human beings can heal and become fully themselves to be realized, relational empathy must be two-way. A common mistake made by egocentric therapists is to provide an empathic setting for the clients and interpret empathic attempts by clients as transference or as attempts at manipulation. People frequently leave therapy still operating from an egocentric frame of reference, wanting others to be empathic with them but having developed few or no relational competences of their own. If people are to function well in the multiple relational contexts of their lives, clients need to learn how to enter self-transcendent states and to develop the capacity for egocentric and sociocentric empathy. This is best developed in a therapeutic relationship that is itself relational and in which mutual empathy can be achieved. Creation of mutual empathy takes trust. It takes commitment to creating conditions that permit emergent forms of consciousness to develop. It takes effort, and time'.³¹

Sometimes in the dark hours of my professional life, I start doubting whether client-centred therapy empowers people to become a less egocentric and more social being. People don't simply open up automatically after successful therapy or after having developed as a person through the humanistic method, and start acting responsibly in the world, for the world. Instead they tend to be encouraged 'to take control here and now of restructuring their own life'³².

But should a person have to do that anyway? Or is this just an absurd claim to make?

Maybe these are personal beliefs and background assumptions. I think it's worthwhile considering what consequences it could have on social and political life, for groups, or for larger societies, if we could argue for a fundamentally relational worldview, and if interaction and the unquestionable interdependence of all living beings could shape our attitude.

The English psychotherapist Brian Thorne writes :

'Rogers never seemed to be absolutely sure whether men and women were essentially relational beings or not. His tendency to employ images culled from agriculture and his emphasis on the actualising tendency and the wisdom of the organism can lead to a highly positive view of the human being, but one which is strangely non-relational except that the evolution of the species is seen to be a part of a universal formative tendency'.

Perhaps this is also the reason why I was so often disappointed and at a loss when in our own collegial groups and associations the climate was not at all shaped by empathy, acceptance and congruence – for me a highly illogical thing to happen after the process of socialization we all have experienced in our own therapy and training for years and years!

I have often wondered: Why have no public structures emerged that have been shaped by the PCA?

Gene Gendlin supposes that:

People find that their inward experience is not at all only what the common categories and shared phrases say. It is vastly more, very much their own from inside, and it opens a new world of human complexity. After that, one wants and needs to live differently. But now what? ... The Encounter Group Movement fed on ever new people, but it developed no continuation, no patterns of meeting or association that could become part of the social fabric. ... The lack of new social patterns clouds the future of Humanistic Psychology today. Along with its lack of theory to communicate with the wider intellectual community,, the lack of embodiment in the social institutions is a second strand of the problem we face The Encounter Group Movement slowed and died around our failure to build social institutional patterns in which one could continue to live in and with this new world of inner human complexity.

Why are we not in charge, not trend-setting? Why are we not politically active, actively shaping the world? Although Rogers has always talked about the political implications of his approach and considered his theory as being subversive and revolutionary, his successors, in my view, lack a vision, which goes beyond the individual ³⁵.

b) The Concept of 'Self'

Maybe to proceed we need a redefinition of the concept of "self" used in our Western culture?

Rogers himself has been reluctant to introduce the concept of 'self' in his theory³⁶. He has also never been very consistent in his theory; his self-concept oscillates between Kierkegaard's 'to be the self that one truly is' and the description of the self as a construct or as a process.

Perhaps 'men and women, individually and together, mentally and organismically'³⁷(quote Rogers) could together develop an awareness for process, always freshly developing larger wholes, and collective movements, without completely abandoning the subjective (always

first!) viewpoint? From other theories about interaction such as “General Systems Theory”, “Social Constructivism”³⁸, or “Deep Ecology”³⁹, we can learn:

- That we as observers have a choice of where and how we draw a framework around something. We are the ones who decide what is an entity, a living being, whether it is a single being, and two or three people together or a group.
- That an accumulation of individuals doesn’t automatically become a group or a social ‘being’. Bigger structures are always ‘more’ than their ‘parts’.
- That everything has consequences, even the choice of a viewpoint or of a concept.
- That it takes a certain kind of education in order to practise this viewpoint.

It was always a major concern of Rogers to democratize therapy, to look at it as an act of emancipation.

We could ask ourselves: What consequences would it have if we thought not only along the lines of an individual-centred psychotherapy but also practised a socio-centric way of thinking? If we considered how people could learn to live in our present realities? Couldn’t it be that in the intersection between therapy and education in which Rogers often operated, engaging with understanding different realities could become an important task?

Footnotes

¹ Slightly revised version of a lecture held at the Second World Congress of Psychotherapy, Vienna, in **July 1999**

² It was published in German in the book by Rogers and R. Rosenberg, *Die Person als Mittelpunkt der Wirklichkeit*, Klett.Cotta 1980, pp. 175-184 (Rogers,

³ See Rogers / Rosenberg (1980), p. 23f.

⁴ Kegan (1982), p. 25

⁵ PCA – person centred approach

⁶ E.g. Rogers in Schmid (1996), p. 546

⁷ See van Balen (1992)

⁸ Rogers (1973), p. 325

⁹ See Frenzel (1991)

¹⁰ Rogers (1972)

¹¹ M. Krüll, in: Efran/Lukens/Lukens (1990), p. 7 Language, Structure, and Change: Frameworks of Meaning in Psychotherapy

¹² s. Thorne (1992), p.36

¹³ Eckert (1994), p. 126

¹⁴ Gendlin (1993)

¹⁵ Schmid (1996), p. 425ff

¹⁶ Thorne (1991), p. 103

¹⁷ Ludewig (1997), p. 31ff

¹⁸ Krüll (1990)

¹⁹ Geissler, Moser, Heisterkamp et al, Geissler (1997)

²⁰ Stern (1999)

²¹ Frenzel (1991), p. 47

²² Whereby Bohm explicitly includes the body, feelings and moods in his concept of "thinking", s. Bohm (1998)

²³ Rogers (1987)

²⁴ Gendlin (1964)

²⁵ An expression from Systemic Therapy, which means an active abandonment of a learned pattern and the practicing of a new one, see Simon (1997)

²⁶ For example, in our theories, the various "bonding styles" are normal patterns of relationships, that describes some of the usual forms in our culture, to bind to each other, (as a special case of "relationship", Stern calls this "aspects of relatedness"). There are individual variations, "structure boundnesses" (Rogers / Gendlin), the so-called "character structures". Of course they are also abstracted from relations, bonds, namely those that were possible in the special biography of this person, respectively could be used. See Geiser (1993), (1995) and (1997) and Geiser /Grosse-Rhode (1993)

²⁷ E.g. in the "Public Forum Focusing", Programs at the focusing office Bamberg 0049 951 52 13 2, or in Bohm's dialogue groups within the GFK (CSF)

²⁸ O'Hara (1997)

²⁹ Gendlin (1998), p. 7

⁰ In real life it's no longer just the environment that is hostile or keeps you healthy, but we are actively harming the environment! It is interesting in this context that such pathology appears nowhere in the psychiatric diagnosis codes...

³¹ O'Hara (1997), p. 314f

³² Wiltschko (1998), p. 21

³³ Thorne (1992), p. 88

³⁴ Gendlin (1998), p. 7

³⁵ With the exception of Wolfgang Pfeiffer, who for years has tirelessly warned not to make the approach too much of a monologue and those who speak of the "reality", "It calls upon us to not constrict our attention on the individual and his inner life, but that we take up the relationship and social-oriented aspects that can be found in the late Rogers, and evolve." (Pfeiffer, 1995)

³⁶ Rogers (1987), p.26ff: "A Digression on the case history of a construct"

³⁷ Rogers in his 1980's article, see chapter 1

³⁸ Gergen (1996)

³⁹ Gottwald (1995)of

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