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### **The unavoidable We in therapy**

Invited statement at the Counseling and Psychotherapy Colloquium of the Carl Rogers Symposium 'Honoring 100 Years of Carl Rogers. His life. Our Work. A Global Vision.' University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, July 25, 2002

I will give three statements in order to look into the future by naming three present tasks:

- 1. The foundations of person-centered therapy establish an ethical position which has profound consequences for the overall understanding of the PCA.*
- 2. Person-Centered Therapy acts out of a fundamental We, which is crucial to understand psychotherapy in our present society and be aware of its political implications.*
- 3. Among the person-centered and experiential 'family', for the sake of identity and coherence, we need distinction and we need co-operation.*

#### **1. The importance of a fundamental ethical statement**

*The foundations of person-centered therapy establish an ethical position which has profound consequences for the overall understanding of the PCA.*

If one reads the 1957 statement by Carl Rogers carefully, one can easily find out that there is much more than a foundation for psychological research. His theory is drawn out of phenomenology and is formulated close to experience, in other words: out of being touched and moved personally by clients. This means that they imply a distinct value judgment.

The same applies to *psychotherapy overall*. By doing psychotherapy and by reflecting this theoretically, a decision is made to respond to the life of another person, to share their joys and sorrows. It derives from being addressed by the other, from being touched, from being asked, from a call. This means that the need of the other is there first and that psychotherapy is responding, is answering to it. Thus all psychotherapy takes its origin at the Other.

*From a person-centered point of view, this causes the Other to become a 'priority'. What happens in psychotherapy, if it is understood as an encounter relationship, is that the client is opening up and disclosing him- or herself. The task of the therapist then is not to try to get knowledge about the client but to acknowledge the person who is showing him- or herself.*

So particularly from a phenomenological consideration, as Carl Rogers did – and not out of morals! – psychotherapy must be regarded as an ethical phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

Or in terms of the 1957 statement by Rogers: Psychotherapy means responding to incongruence, to a vulnerable or anxious person. Even more: If one considers the six conditions as necessary and sufficient for a constructive development of the person by means of psychotherapy, then it is an obligation for the therapist to take them into account (contact, client's incongruence,

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<sup>1</sup> This should not be misunderstood in a moralistic way. Ethics denotes moral philosophy, not casuistry or moralizing. Ethics here is understood as the foundation and not as a consequence of anthropology or practice. It must not be misunderstood in a moralistic or casuistic way; it denotes – from a phenomenological and anthropological point of view – the philosophy of the challenge of living in terms of how to live responsibly.

communication of therapist's attitudes) or to offer them respectively (congruence, unconditional positive regard, empathy). The therapist is seen as somebody responding to the needs of another person and therefore responsible in the communication. In a word: Psychotherapy is ethically founded.

Thus response-ability is the basic category of being a person: Out of encounter arises the obligation to respond. Accordingly, psychotherapy means service to the fellow person out of solidarity.

So I am convinced: Therapy means being asked to respond and 'response-ability': The foundations of person-centered acting establish an ethical position. And this has tremendous consequences. It turns around epistemology and anthropology (and partially is in line with Martin van Kalmthout's statement about a philosophy of life). Furthermore I fully underline what Brian Thorne said just before about the relevance of the Person-Centered Approach today and its counter-cultural position.

## **2. Person-Centered Therapy relies on a fundamental We-Perspective**

*Person-Centered Therapy acts out of a fundamental We, which is crucial to understand psychotherapy in our present society and be aware of its political implications.*

In its basic statements the PCA is founded in the conviction that we are not merely a-contextual individuals, we only exist as part of a 'We'. Without stating it explicitly this is also inherent in Rogers' theory from the very beginning.

If we ignore this We, we ignore that we are unavoidably a part of the world, we ignore our roots, our past, our presence and our future. This leads to the a-contextual view of the human being which is so present in many shortsighted, so called humanistic conceptions which proved to be self- or even ego-centered. If we take this stance we ignore our limitedness, our finiteness, we ignore death – we ignore the *conditio humana*.

This We is not an undifferentiated mass, nor is it an accumulation of Mes, it includes commonality and difference and it values both equally. What constitutes a We is the common esteem for diversity.

If we ignore this We, all the terrible and horrible things happen which we know from the history of mankind up to the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, the 11th of September, 2001 and recent political developments in Europe and elsewhere.

It was our culture in which the horror of the 20th century originated. Enlightenment and humanism couldn't prevent the terror regimes of the twentieth century. And the same goes for a lot of the reasons for today's terrorism. For a great deal the roots lie in the incapability of the occident to see this We of the global world (if it is not in terms of markets).

Psychotherapy without political awareness and without political conviction is naïve and often inefficient, e.g. think of the work with victims of any kind.

The opposite to this We is an 'Us' out of a rejecting reflex, out of an over-identification with sameness and a shift of the difference to the outside (to 'Them', to 'Those'). Then sameness is positive and difference is negative.

Each of us is somebody else's other. Person-Centered Therapy, acknowledging the differences, builds a bridge between them, it neither ignores them nor does it try to remove them, it bridges.

It respects the Other as truly another not as an *alter ego* and comes from living side by side to being together. It always is aware that the a-contextual dual is an artificial construct. There is always 'the Third One', there are many Others, the Others of the Others, groups, communities, societies, interests, nations, mankind as such. Even in one-to-one therapy the others are present. And there is always a co-perspective in Person-

Centered Therapy: Client(s) & therapist(s) are co-experiencing, co-responding to what comes up, they are co-operating, co-creating the relationship and their futures.

Thus, according to the state of the art of anthropology and epistemology we need to reframe our therapeutic theory and practice from a fundamental We-perspective.

I will elaborate on both of the aspects I mentioned in my open space paper ([www.pfs-online.at/papers/paper-lajolla2002.htm](http://www.pfs-online.at/papers/paper-lajolla2002.htm)) which I will offer as a Powerpoint presentation and would like to discuss them with you. It also deals with Germain Lietaer's criteria which I see quite different.

### **3. The 'person-centered and experiential family' needs co-operation and differentiation.**

*Among the person-centered and experiential 'family', for the sake of identity and coherence, we need distinction and we need co-operation.*

While nowadays goal- and skill-oriented approaches are en vogue mainly because of socio-political claims for efficiency, open and holistic concepts and a relationship-orientated understanding become more important in various schools of therapy, from psychoanalysts to CBT and systemic approaches – a development undoubtedly influenced by PCT

*For the realm of therapy as such this means:* Even if a wide range of orientations increasingly see the relationship between therapist(s) and client(s) and authenticity as crucial, nevertheless these tendencies stay far behind the radical paradigm change of Carl Rogers. So our approach is an ongoing challenge to these other approaches and we should see their developments, even if they ignore their person-centered origin, as a strong influence of our approach on the field of psychotherapy and counseling as a whole.

Within the so called 'Rogerian family' there is an increasing range of approaches and therapies. There are developments which have different accents, orientations which are related to Rogers' ideas but come to different conclusions than the founder. This normal development should be seen as an enrichment.

There is not one way of acting in a person-centered manner. On the other hand not everything can be called person-centered, if the term should mean anything (as Barbara Brodley's stated). And it is also true that some people obviously only make use of our good name. Therefore I consider it to be crucial to carefully elaborate and name our fundamental principles in order to be able to be identified. I strongly want to stress the necessity of criteria for identity, coherence and identification.

I like the paradigm of 'the family' for the person-centered and experiential community. In each family there are different members. They share a family name and they have different first names.

I am convinced that it is necessary both, to work together and to clearly be aware and name the differences among us. Therefore, no doubt,  
- a worldwide cooperation is needed with  
- common conferences (like the ICCCEP, now PCE-Conference)  
- a common high-level journal for theory and practice like the one now launched by the World Association, 'Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies'.

A World Association is of fundamental importance to further develop our approaches. An ongoing dialogue makes more sense than splitting up, it enriches instead of fostering fantasies of purity and – not the least – it makes us stronger at a time when the approaches deserve co-operation in order to be influential in therapy, philosophy and health politics.

Carl Rogers gave such a decisive impulse and left us such a rich legacy that a concrete realization of a number of consequences is yet to come. The fundamental positions of Rogers are not at all out-dated – on the contrary they are not yet sounded out by far, in their radicalism and their critical

potential for a profound humanism.

Our approach, claiming to be an overall philosophy of culture, challenges us to an increasing understanding of the *conditio humana* and to what it means to be a human. If the approach is taken seriously as an 'approach' and not as a ready-made doctrine, 'not as a 'school' or dogma but as a set of tentative principles', to quote Carl Rogers and John Wood (1974), then it still is the emancipatory approach *par excellence*.

Almost half a century after Rogers' revolutionary statement in 1957, at a time when goal- and method-oriented approaches of psychotherapy are booming, a genuine *person-oriented* conviction might be even more necessary. To oppose the temptation of *becoming more and more technical and one-sidedly oriented towards efficiency* - as Art Bohart stated before -, a characteristic of our days, is an ethical challenge as well. One that might be more acute than ever.

Thank you.