

**THE FORMATIVE TENDENCY:  
PERSON-CENTERED SYSTEMS THEORY,  
INTERDEPENDENCE AND  
HUMAN POTENTIAL**

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**ABSTRACT**

Even though Rogers wrote that the formative tendency 'definitely forms a base for the person-centered approach (1980: 133), it has remained a seldom-explored construct. For example, a PsycINFO search on November 12, 2006 using the term 'formative tendency' accounted for only 8 of the 5,190 references yielded by the term 'client-centered'. While the formative tendency rarely has been explored directly, recent writings concerning the person-centered approach from the perspective of systems theory (e.g. Cornelius-White, 2007a; Kriz, 2006, 2007; O'Hara, 2006/2007; Seeman, 2001, Wyatt, 2001) are rich ground for understanding how the formative tendency has been a silent but salient participant in 'the quiet revolution' that is the person-centered approach.

With the postulation of the formative tendency, Rogers expanded his lifelong attempt to understand phenomena where order emerges, changes and develops in a system without the imposition of that order from the outside, or without someone explicitly making that order. Today, in the interdisciplinary discourse of systems theory, we speak of these phenomena as 'self-organization'. This discourse includes sub-concepts such as 'emergence' (the self-organized formation of order, patterns or structure) and 'phase transition' (the self-organized change of order, patterns or structure), which are based on 'interconnectedness' (interactive, reciprocal feedback loops). The 'formative tendency' concept forces a recognition that actualization processes are relevant as a challenging perspective on epistemology (the study of knowing), as well as to the development of a psychology (the study of individual people). Further, it offers a means to knowledge not just of individual persons but also of groups, social forces, biodiversity, chemistry and many other areas. The following section will trace the development of Rogers' thinking regarding actualization processes from the person to increasingly larger systems.

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FORMATIVE TENDENCY**

Rogers was aware that the phenomena of emerging and (self-organized) changing of order must be explained by totally different principles than those of classical behaviorism

and Western, mechanistic science. Yet, these behavioral concepts still govern the overarching Western understanding of the world, including its living beings, in everyday psychology and worldview. While the concept of control, or external imposition of order to a system, may function well if one has to repair a defective engine or beat out the dents in a tin can, interveining with a living being, such as with a client in psychotherapy, is better explained with different principles. These principles describe the phenomena of self-organized order and take reciprocal change processes into account (Kriz, 2006).

Over 50 years ago, in *Client-Centered Therapy*, Rogers (1951) refers to the 'self' as a 'Gestalt'. Gestalt Psychology (especially the Berlin School) had already developed its core concept of 'Gestalt', which stresses that a structural whole integrates several elements in a dynamic manner (the 'bottom up' perspective) while special features of the elements get their meaning primarily through being parts of the whole (the 'top down' perspective). For example, a melody integrates individual tones, and can remain 'the same melody' when transposed into another key because of the structural invariance of the relationships among the tones. A melody also gives special meaning to many of its tones—for example, the 'key tone', the 'leading tone', etc. Because Rogers was especially interested in the *developmental* perspective—how persons can change themselves and under what facilitating conditions—he focused not only on the dynamic stability of the Gestalt but more so on the concept of 'self-actualization', coined by Kurt Goldstein (1939). As a physiologist, Goldstein was referring to the self-organizing processes of a biological organism, particularly the human organism.<sup>1</sup> Following Goldstein, Rogers (1951) uses the term 'self-actualization' to stress that the development of a human being, and his or her functioning, is based mostly on *inherent* structural possibilities. Human development—including development that is facilitated by the support of a therapist—is towards 'increasing self-government, self-regulation, and autonomy, and away from heteronomous control, or control by external forces' (Rogers, 1951: 488).

As his theory of personality developed, the 'self' as a psychological construct became so important that Rogers made an analytical distinction between the actualization of the 'self', termed 'self-actualization', and the actualization of the organism, now referred to simply as 'actualization'. Although 'self-actualization' is a part or aspect of the actualization of the whole human being, the meaning of the term 'self-actualization' changed. In Rogers' theory 'self-actualization' is not actualization by one's *self* in contrast to external imposed order. Rather, it involves the actualization of a 'self-concept' in contrast to the whole phenomenal field of the person's experience. Hence, 'self-actualization' refers to the psychological level, while 'actualization' refers to the holistic level, including the body-based or biological.

Because this idea either was not understood or was rejected by those psychologists who still believed only in the classical control principles of Western science—and even devalued by some as not being in tune with 'science'—Rogers looks for support of his theoretical descriptions and explanations in the hard sciences of physics, chemistry, and

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1. Indeed, after his forced emigration from Germany to the USA due to the Nazi regime, Goldstein became famous as one of the founders of the American 'organismic approach'.

biology. He, in fact, found this support for his principles among certain theories in science that already had been formulated:

I am not alone in seeing such an actualizing tendency as the fundamental answer to the question of what makes an organism 'tick.' Goldstein (1947), Maslow (1954), Angyal (1941, 1965), Szent Gyoergyi (1974), and others have held similar views and have influenced my own thinking. (Rogers, 1980: 119)

He got further support from the rise of Interdisciplinary Systems Theory in the 1970s, which was validated by the award of Nobel prizes to its leading proponents. Rogers, unlike most psychologists, was aware of this highly significant paradigm change in science. He broadened his concept of actualization to include phenomena exceeding the psychological and somatic level to phenomena of self-organization on the interpersonal levels and beyond. He called this broader notion the 'formative tendency'. As a consequence, in person-centered theory, the 'self-actualization tendency' (on the psychological level) is a special aspect of the 'actualization tendency' (on the organismic level), which in turn is a special aspect of the 'formative tendency' (on the universal level).

### THE INCONSISTENCY OF THE FORMATIVE TENDENCY WITH WESTERN SOCIETY

Client-centered therapy is best seen as a transformational paradigm (Rogers, 1977, 1980). However, it has been described typically within the context of Western culture. Western society is largely concerned with 'power over' a person's environment, including other people, animals, minerals, and plants. Science and Enlightenment values are externally imposed values that put control at the center of the discovery of 'knowledge'. In particular, the behavioral paradigm of control through reinforcement still dominates psychology.

This paradigm, which involves the isolation of behavior by or toward the individual person, like the isolation of the individual variable in traditional science, is not an appropriate way of describing our world if one takes the interrelationship of material entities into account. The understanding of 'the world', even in physics or chemistry, had to change to account for these phenomena, where feedback and interrelationship are important. In the arena of living beings, especially for human beings, interrelationship is ubiquitous. Mechanistic science, therefore, explains only 'a special artificial area of our world'. It is a nineteenth-century belief that this approach would give a sufficient description not only of mechanistic arrangements of matter, but of the whole world, including biological phenomena and even human beings. Modern science, by contrast, has proven that 'these principles work only under very restricted conditions and constraints, which are adequate for machines but, as it turned out, inadequate for entities where complex recursive processes are essential' (Kriz, 2006: 126).

## THE CONSISTENCY OF THE FORMATIVE TENDENCY WITH INTERDISCIPLINARY SYSTEMS THEORY

Interdisciplinary systems theory shows that in the developmental dynamics of a system—i.e., for an entity where the interrelationship of parts is crucial—order can emerge ('emergence') and change ('phase transition') due to the changing conditions of the surroundings. However, these 'conditions' neither impose order nor transport order from outside into the system, as would be understood by the classical approach and interventions. In contrast to a classical understanding, these 'conditions' can only support or facilitate the process of emergence or phase transition of order, which are due to inherent possibilities. Therefore, in dealing with such systems, even physicists and chemists have to respect their inherent structural possibilities and cannot 'shape' their structure and order through will or force alone.

Other principles are important in dynamic systems. For example, the emergence and phase transition of order shows that the classical understanding of bigger inputs resulting in bigger outputs (or bigger stimuli resulting in bigger responses) does not hold. For any particular system, with its own unique history and special status, strong influences might result in almost no effects due to a smoothing away of the 'perturbations' (attractor effects). In other states, and/or due to other historical pathways, even very small influences can result in very big (or 'qualitative') changes ('butterfly effects'). These phenomena are typical in the area of the development of living beings, and in particular human beings. In these living human systems, 'jumps' to new levels after a period of nearly no (observable) progress is typical, such as a sudden change in the understanding of a complex problem after collecting many pieces of disparate information (the 'Aha' experience described by Gestalt Psychology). In literature and tales of wisdom, these sudden jumps in the dynamics of structure have been referred to by the principle of 'die and become!', stressing that a new (partial) order, pattern or structure is only possible by overcoming the old one and passing the gate (or state) of chaotic instability. The idea of 'growth' in Humanistic Psychology refers to this same principle of 'die and become'. This is opposed to the notion of growth as accumulating more and more, which Western cultures might advocate.

In systems science one has to respect (or at least take into account) the history of the system, as the same conditions of the surroundings can often be associated with very different states in the system. An example of this is the principle of 'hysteresis' (also called 'homeostasis'). Hysteresis refers to an over-stability of a system's state against the change of the surroundings. The inner status and potentials of the system are at least as important as the influence of the surroundings. A system does not just 'react' to external stimuli, as the classical approach assumes.

The phenomena of emergence and phase transition are related to a connection between bottom-up and top-down dynamics (see also Kriz, 2006). We explored this through the example of a melody and its individual notes. The parts contribute, bottom up, to the emergence of order. Order structures or 'field forces', top down, further the dynamics of the parts. This holds true for and can be seen in human beings. For example,

cultural rules are continued over time and generations by human action (bottom up), while cultural rules (patterns, order) in turn structure the behavioral learning of people, particularly in each new generation (top down). The relationship between top-down and bottom-up dynamics can also be seen in prejudice. Individuals focusing on 'strange' and 'untrustworthy' behaviors of other people may, bottom up, create an 'attitude' and 'worldview' of mistrust or prejudice. At the same time, these worldviews can act as 'field forces' that, top down, influence the cognitive processes of individuals to focus on 'strange' and 'untrustworthy' actions of others.

Cornelius-White (2006a) describes how the purpose of the book *Carl Rogers On Personal Power* was to explore 'the ways in which control is exercised, consciously or unconsciously' (Rogers, 1977: 56). Rogers used the concept of subtle veils of cultural conditioning to explain how a social consciousness, outside our individual awareness, can shape our individual views. Social forces like gender, race, and nationality structure top down our individual attitudes towards the bottom-up behaviors of individuals with particular genders, races, or nationalities. Whiteness, patriarchy and language are strong systemic attractors and explanatory concepts for much injustice and suffering. Rogers (1977) aimed for the PCA to 'do away with discrimination', offering examples of a subtle veil of sexism, including 'less obvious situations like our language—*markind*, chair*man*, homage to *Himi*' (p. 45).

The principles of interdisciplinary systems science obviously are much more adequate than the principles of classical Western science in referring to, describing, and understanding many phenomena regarded central to the life processes of human beings. However, we want to stress that such an assertion is not an ontological statement. We totally dislike statements that are reductionistic conceptualizations without qualification, such as: 'The human being is non-linear and, therefore, a self-organizing system.' The human being is a human being. Period. When a human being jumps out of the window of a skyscraper, the principles of classical physics would suffice when answering questions concerning the nature of the fall (such as trajectory and speed). For some inquiries, for example the analysis of a small piece of flesh under a microscope, classical biology would also suffice. For some other questions the behavioral approach also may be adequate. However, if one does not take a living being as an isolated system, but takes into account its interrelationships, the principles of systems theory are more complete and satisfying descriptors than the principles of classical Western science. The 'formative tendency' in the person-centered approach is a central construct that reflects the principles of systems theory.

We should be aware that even the principles of systems theory do not adequately answer all questions regarding human beings. However, we can use these principles to explore the dynamics of many cognitive and interpersonal processes. We can even use mathematics to express these principles with a high degree of precision (e.g., Kriz, 2006). However, to understand the essence of a human being in contrast to other living beings or entities in the world, we must turn to philosophy, such as the descriptions and principles of Existentialism. According to Heidegger, we have to accept that a human being cannot be understood as a category or class like all other 'things' in the world, which are defined

by their 'whatness', because 'man is never a what—his essence (self) lies in his existence' (King, 1964: 66). The human being, as a reflexive being, can—and must—meaningfully define his own existence and his own presence in this world. His different mode of being frees him from categorization. And from this point of view, a person can be understood best 'from the inside'—through one's personal understanding and narratives of one's biographical past, one's meaning and value structures, as well as one's ideas of one's future. Psychology is the science that must face both of these perspectives—a science in which the inner and outer views of life's processes meet.

Interdisciplinary systems theory and its principles do not attempt to answer all questions that might be important in the realm of a human being. Neither the movement of a human falling from a skyscraper, nor the essence of existence and freedom can or should be described by these principles. However, there are many important phenomena, especially related to developmental or psychotherapeutic aspects of human beings (including their relationships in couples, families or organizations), which we claim can be described and understood best by these principles of self-organization (and more poorly, for example, by principles of stimulus-response analysis, or other mechanistic principles).

## FACILITATION AND IMAGINATION

Actualization 'is neither a belief nor an assumption in Rogers' theory, but a simple description of the consequences of seriously taking interconnectedness and relationships into account' (Kriz, 2007: 40). This understanding of the actualizing tendency must be considered when we refer to real-world, non-artificial or isolated processes. However, we must also take into account other aspects, which are in tune with interdisciplinary systems theory. Facilitation and imagination are two such aspects, which ask us in particular to 'trust' rather than to 'do or control'. With the formative tendency, we are focusing more on fluid boundaries and categories. We are open to possibilities, contrasting 'planning' with 'imagining the future' (Kriz, 2006). Planning means that development starts from a clearly analyzed status and proceeds in well-defined steps in order to reach an explicitly given aim. Deviation or departure from these steps is interpreted as failure or error and, therefore, it is corrected or eliminated. If goals or conditions change, planning must begin again. Imagination, on the other hand, means that development proceeds towards a roughly specified goal. Moving in a general direction, decisions have to be made and the goal becomes more and more clear along the way. Decisions are generated and goals become more clear in a reciprocal manner. The whole path is adaptive to changing needs or conditions, and the goal may change a great deal in the process.

Non-directivity is a crucial aspect of trust. The non-directive therapist is not an expert in content, but an expert in facilitating developmental processes of emergence and transition of inherent potentials. This stance is obviously at odds with the perspective of medical-model, disorder-specific treatments, of training the right behavior, or of teaching self-control. Instead of reducing the client to a carrier or manifestation of a

disorder category, the non-directive perspective respects the uniqueness of individual human beings, including their specific potentials and biographies. Angyal (1951) wrote, 'it is incongruous with the nature of love to try to reduce the loved person to an item in one's personal world, or to try to make him comply with one's demands, or to try to exert power over him in whatever way' (p. 131).

The person-centered approach is not the only way to bring about change. However, we also assert that the healing power of the person-centered approach is due to respect for the formative tendency. This stance is in contrast to a stance of imposing order, and is an ethical resolution. Imposing order from outside and controlling the results can work rather well. For example, after a concert, a rhythmic clapping, a synchronizing of all of the individual clapping rhythms in the audience, very often will spontaneously emerge from the initial chaos of applause. This synchronized clapping rhythm can also be imposed by means of 'classical' intervention. Imagine a concert for an army. At the end, an officer jumps on stage. He has learned in the army, and heard from politicians, teachers, or even a therapist with a 'classical' worldview, that order has to be imposed. Shouting 'wasn't it a nice concert?' he might make big clapping movements, adding 'let's clap—now, now, now!' If the soldiers follow, order is imposed from the outside.

## EMERGENCE AND EMERGENCY

The top-down power of ordering fields can reduce or restrict potential in individuals to find new solutions to meet new requirements. In natural science systems theory this is known by the principle of 'enslaving'. Kriz (2006) addresses this dynamic in his discussion of 'meaning fields', which can impose order, top down, and restrict individual creativity. The structural forces of narratives, terms, categories, or assumptions may then configure the processes of perception, rational-emotive mediation, and behavior of single human beings as well as of couples, families, organizations and other systems. New situations can be responded to reactively (emergency) or with appreciation of the possibilities they engender (emergence). Many structural forces are present in narratives due to the individual's personal biography, the history of a couple, and the more far-reaching histories of families over generations and even in our culture as a whole.

Rogers (1951) highlighted the importance of the structural forces of a distorted symbolization in the self with regard to the experience of a single person:

The accurate symbolization would be: 'I perceive my parents as experiencing this behavior as unsatisfying to them.' The distorted symbolization, distorted to preserve the threatened concept of self, is: '*I* perceive this behavior as unsatisfying.' It is in this way, it would seem, that parental attitudes are not only introjected, but what is much more important, are experienced not as the attitude of another, but in distorted fashion, *as if* based on the evidence of one's own sensory and visceral equipment. (p. 500)

The forces of distorted symbolization can be seen also in a couple's communications. A couple's history gives rise to patterns of meaning that influence how communications are received and interpreted. These 'emerged patterns' reduce the ability of individuals in a couple to listen carefully to what is said here and now. The potential for change (e.g., improved communication) is thereby reduced, or enslaved. A typical situation in couples therapy is that a therapist asks one partner: 'Did you hear what your partner just said?' The client answers, 'No, I didn't—but by the way my partner looked at me, I already knew what he would say!'

Similarly, the common diagnosis, or narrative, that little Peter 'has a behavior disorder' reduces the highly complex space of situations and interpretations to one single static and inflexible focus: 'behavior disorder'. But there may be situations in which his behavior appears to be a natural reaction to provocation from his sister. In other situations, it could be a signal asking for more attention. Sometimes, it might serve to distract attention away from conflict between his parents. Of course, there will certainly also be situations in which he is simply outrageously impossible, but even this can be described more accurately and poetically than simply resorting to a diagnostic label of 'behavior disorder'. It is of crucial importance to move beyond the constraints of the 'behavior disorder' label and restore awareness of the complexity and breadth of situations and their significance.

Kriz (2006) described the complex attracting forces in our '*Lebenswelt*', defined as 'our personal experience and understanding of the world, including the individual, social, political, and environmental perspectives'. These structures function in our everyday experience without being explicitly conscious or even an object of reflection' (p. 62). In this sense, even the principles of Western science and behaviorism serve as structural forces ordering the thought of many people in our culture. We see this when clients come to therapy with the 'idea' that they should be 'fixed' like a machine, or at least that the therapist should give some advice or 'answer' from 'expertise' or 'knowledge' and thereby bring some order to their life.

### **TOWARD GREATER ORDER AND GREATER COMPLEXITY: ON CHAOS AND ORGANIZATION—THE PARADOX OF THE EVOLUTIONARY TENDENCY**

The attracting forces of 'subtle veils', concepts, narratives, and rules of our culture are indeed powerful. They reduce the complexity of possible interpretations and meaning of 'what is going on' to categories of content and explanatory rules. 'Ordering', even by the formative tendency or self-organization, is always a reduction of complexity. In this sense, Rogers' definition of the formative tendency as an 'evolutionary tendency' not only toward 'greater order', but also toward 'greater complexity', would appear to be a contradiction. But it is not. We would find a dominance of attracting (and thereby complexity-reducing) forces only in meta-stable system-environment relationships; i.e., when the conditions of the environment are rather stable. However, in contrast to stable

mechanistic ‘things’—such as a tin can—systems adequately described by non-linear dynamics, like self-organization and emergence of order, are typically highly adaptive to changes in environmental conditions. To be clear, this does not at all mean that *order* is imported from the outside. In contrast, phase transition, the self-organized change of order, patterns, and structure, always means that complexity increases, that the dynamic stability of the attractor becomes unstable. From this unstable point, a multitude of possibilities opens up. In further development, the system again reduces complexity; i.e., it develops another attractor, finding new order, patterns, and structure (for details see Kriz, 1992; Matthes *et al.*, 2001).

This description of change by phase transition corresponds exactly with the principle of ‘die and become!’ This principle is a valid description of ‘growth’ in Humanistic Psychologies, such as the person-centered approach. Normally, this adaptive change of order/patterns takes place without the help of psychotherapists. For example, imagine a family of a father, a mother and a 3-year-old daughter. The patterns of interaction that have emerged in this small family may be very good at present, and adequate for each family member. However, if we continue to see these same patterns twenty years later, some people, including the family members, might refer to the situation with terms like ‘crazy’ or ‘pathological’. Twenty years later, treating a (now) 23-year-old woman as if she were still three years old is, of course, mad. Normally this does not happen: due to changing environmental conditions in which the interaction patterns are embedded—maturation, changing demands and requests of the daughter from other people, expectations that the daughter should make her own decisions, etc.—the patterns of interaction will make one (or more) phase transitions in adapting to changed or changing demands. In other words, some of the patterns really ‘die’ while others ‘become’.

Patterns do not only change on the level of interaction. They also change on the level of cognitive and emotive processes change. This change typically occurs through increasing complexity (e.g., ‘passing the gate of chaos’), leaving previous attractors of order behind. New attractors are established as the system finds new order, patterns, and meaning. The formative tendency, with its movement toward ‘greater order’, as well as toward ‘greater complexity’, works in a ‘breathing’ rhythm: the ‘die and become!’ of growth means that order (in other words, reduced complexity) actually becomes more complex due to the changing environment. It becomes unstable (and increasingly presents more possibilities). It leaves the ‘old’ order (it ‘dies’) and reduces complexity again by finding a new order, which is more adaptive to the changed demands of the environment (for more details, see Kriz, 1997, 1999, 2006).<sup>2</sup>

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2. These descriptions are still somewhat simplistic. The processes relevant for a human being, whom we describe by way of systems theory, have many aspects, and must be described in a multidimensional space. In some dimensions in this multidimensional space we may find that a process has attracting, order increasing, and complexity reducing aspects. At the same time, in other dimensions in this same space, the opposite may be true. Readers who are familiar with modern systems theory in detail may be aware of the notion of a ‘phase space’. Such readers should think of the famous ‘Lorenz Attractor’ which, although only in a phase space of three dimensions, shows that attractive and ‘chaotic’ dimensions exist together in one process.

There are situations where no change takes place, even though the 'conditions of the environment' obviously have changed. In other words, the system is 'maladaptive', (e.g., the family with a 23-year-old daughter interacting as if she were a three-year-old child). This situation does not contradict the notion of the 'formative tendency', nor the notion of the actualizing tendency. It is not an adequate description if we say that the process got 'stuck', is 'blocked' or is 'maladaptive'. If we speak in this way, we are not aware of all the conditions and different perspectives as they mix together. Even if a system appears maladaptive, it is always adapting and unfolding its formative potential to the whole array of environmental conditions. For the individual human being, and specifically in client-centered therapy, Rogers (1951) stressed:

- I) Every individual exists in a continually changing world of experience of which he is the center.
  - II) The organism reacts to the field as it is experienced and perceived. This perceptual field is, for the individual, 'reality.'
  - III) The organism reacts as an organized whole to this phenomenal field.
- (p. 483-6)

Due to 'introjections', 'traumatized perceptions', and other idiosyncrasies, the observer's reality of the 'obvious conditions' may not be the same as the client's or family's reality of the conditions. In the extreme case of the extreme example with the 23-year-old daughter who is treated as if she is three years old, the 'objective' conditions may have changed drastically over the twenty years since she was actually three years old, due to such factors as maturation and new demands. However, perhaps the daughter has had, since the age of three, severe and life-threatening asthma. The changing conditions of maturation and new demands may be rather unimportant compared the family's 'views' and beliefs that every 'change' is dangerous. In such a case, the pattern we see is actually adapted to *that reality*, which is the family's 'real reality'. The pattern or order is established not *in spite* of the actualizing tendency, but *because* of it. Nothing got 'stuck'. The system is not 'maladaptive'. It is, in actuality, working very well with respect to a *particular* reality, that of the family. As person-centered therapists, we trust that the pattern will change in the context of a relationship with a therapist who brings new conditions to this reality, due to the formative tendency. A 'reality' structured by abstract categories is much more stable and reduced than a 'reality' full of here-and-now experiences. Person-centered therapy facilitates movement toward *experiencing* the world in more vivid, complex, and creative encounter that is in tune with the here and now. It facilitates the conditions whereby reduced, abstract descriptions are broken down and 'die', allowing for a more full here-and-now experience to 'become'.

#### UPHEAVAL, LEARNING TO LEARN, AND ADAPTING TO CHANGINGNESS

The example of the 23-year-old daughter is, of course, rather extreme and artificial. But it should make the point clear that 'upheaval' can give rise to a new stage of development. In other words, instability creates a challenge to be creative and grow. This, of course,

necessitates a condition of trust. Upheaval can also lead to reductive abstraction—the fear of uncertainty can establish narrative structures that limit scrutiny because of this reductive abstraction. In ‘*Lebenswelt* in Upheaval’ (Kriz, 2004, partly in English in Kriz, 2006) it is shown how ‘symptoms’ are interwoven in such processes on different levels. Different levels of meaning for individuals, families and the whole culture influence each other.

Our shared ‘*Lebenswelt* in Upheaval’ includes endless wars, environmental degradation, genocides,<sup>3</sup> species extinctions,<sup>4</sup> gender violence, avoidable famine, oppression and terrorism. It presents both an extreme vulnerability and a ‘path to social and psychological evolution’ (O’Hara, 2006/2007: 47). O’Hara (2006/2007) argues, ‘No one is ‘native’ in this new culture; ‘culture shock’ and cognitive dissonance are pandemic, bewilderment is normal and—with the rapid pace of change—is likely ever to be’ (p. 50). The principles of Western science, particularity control instead of trust, imposing order instead of facilitating and imagining inherent possibilities, has run to its edge. Respecting the formative tendency offers an alternative by which to adapt.

Rogers’ (1951, 1969, 1983) educational writings highlight the broader formative tendency, whereas his psychotherapy writings highlight the narrower actualizing tendency. Rogers discusses the necessity of learning to learn, or adaptating to ‘changingness’, for humanity to survive (Cornelius-White, 2006c, 2007b; Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, in press). If changingness is seen as the reality for our future, as Rogers, O’Hara and others have suggested, then the concepts of emergence, phase transitions, and interrelatedness become core constructs for a humanistic ‘response-ability’. Even in 1951, Rogers wrote of the intention to ‘release the group’ to actualize (p. 59) and of situations where ‘the group took responsibility upon itself’ (p. 56).

## HUMAN POTENTIAL: ECOLOGICAL BALANCE AND DE-CENTERING THERAPY

### ECOLOGICAL BALANCE: ORGANISMIC INTEGRATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

Seeman (2001) has for over 50 years described how the person can be understood best from a combination of biochemical, physiological, perceptual, precognitive, cognitive, interpersonal, and ecological perspectives. In this way the congruent (or to use Seeman’s preferred term, organismically integrated) person is conceptualized as connected and communicated across all of these levels, simultaneously and non-reductionistically. A person is not thought of as just an individual but also a relationship between the body’s parts and all that is around that body. In this way, one’s ‘phenomenal field’, to borrow Rogers’ term, is visceral, subjective and co-created by larger systems. Similarly,

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3. See <[www.genocidewatch.org](http://www.genocidewatch.org)>.

4. See <[www.overpopulation.org](http://www.overpopulation.org)>.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes human ecology in terms of nested systems where a person is a person, but also part of their microsystem (such as the family or classroom), the mesosystem (which is two microsystems in interaction), the exosystem (which is a system influencing development, i.e., parental workplace), and the macrosystem (the larger cultural context). Each system contains roles, norms and rules that can powerfully shape development.

Rogers (1951), in lengthy citations, seems to acknowledge the salience of the ecology of organisms. He wrote, 'Angyal's statement [1941] could be used as a synonym for actualization: "Life is an autonomous event which takes place *between the organism and the environment* [italics added]. Life processes do not merely tend to preserve life but transcend the momentary status quo of the organism"' (Rogers, 1959: 196). He also cited Pearse and Williamson (1938: 38–40), 'the biologist conceives an order emanating from the organism *living in poise in its environment* [italics added]. Our necessity, therefore, is to secure the free flow of forces in the environment so that the order inherent in their material we are studying may emerge and change adaptively. Our interest is in that *balance of forces* [italics added] which sustains naturally and spontaneously the forms of life we are studying' (1951: 62). Likewise, many ancestral worldviews, particularly those of people of color, view persons as embedded in connections with others, interdependent, part of their tribe or family before being seen as an individual (Cornelius-White, 2006b, 2006d).

Though a person is best understood from the 'inside' or personally, we also acknowledge that the personal is not an isolated phenomenon. For many people the personal is about their environment, especially their loved ones. In the context of his 'Person-Centered Systems Approach', Kriz (1991) has shown how the internal cognitive-emotive processes which are essential for the 'self' and the 'person' are embedded in interactive and communicative processes of the family and the whole culture. The emergence and co-construction of 'meaning attractors' (Kriz, 2006) refer to meaning structures both of the person and of the social systems in a bottom-up as well as in a top-down relationship. The oft repeated phrase, 'the personal is political' captures some of this paradox, while Schmid's (2001) eloquent words describe it this way: there are 'two unrenounceable dimensions of human existence: the substantial or individual aspect of being a person and the relational or dialogical aspect of becoming a person' (p. 214). People are both individuals and their relationships.

Cornelius-White (2007c) writes:

If the formative tendency is central to understanding the person-centered approach in concert with its sub-concept, the actualizing tendency, then the responsibility of person-centered practitioners shifts to releasing the natural tendency of not just individuals, but groups, other organisms, and perhaps most importantly the ecology ... The formative tendency and a corresponding nondirectivity values life not just individuals. As such, it becomes 'obvious that the approach needs further development towards a truly social approach' and to 'authentically implement the essence of it into all fields of life' (Schmid, 2001: 226) ... The formative person-centered approach is the practice of respecting the truth and diversity of life, including each person, each group,

each species, and the overall web itself. It is a profound relinquishment of control, not only over individual persons, but over all life. While implicit in the actualizing tendency, the formative tendency helps us realize that 'everythingisconnectedtoeverythingelse' in such a way that our ethical obligation must be greater than to the individual. (pp. 135, 137)

The formative tendency contributes to an appreciation of the interdependence that is instrumental to the self-organization and transformative aspects of the person-centered approach.

## CONCLUSION

### DE-CENTERING THERAPY: A COROLLARY OF THE FORMATIVE PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH

O'Hara (2006/2007) states, 'Rogers had lost interest in counseling and therapy almost entirely ... He felt increasingly that the problems facing humanity were on a scale far beyond what could be helped through individual counseling [which had become] de-contextualized and alienated from the looming cultural issues' (p. 54). Nevertheless, Rogers was also clear that he did not see the old client-centered therapy and the new person-centered approach as inherently different (Rogers, Cornelius-White, and Cornelius-White, 2005). Rogers described 'persons of tomorrow' who will survive in the future. Cornelius-White (2007a) summarizes the values of persons of tomorrow as being 'open to experience, authentic, intimate, capable of living with change and ambiguity, altruistic, revering of nature, building of egalitarian institutions, internally moral, less materialistic, and yearning for harmonious spiritual and/or ecological connections.' (p. 65). Beyond this, Cornelius-White (2007a) summarizes five themes that appear to be representative of the emerging person-centered paradigm, all of which are consistent with the formative tendency: '(1) being part of an ecological context; (2) balancing dialectics of rationality and emergence; (3) trusting and appreciating creativity; (4) facilitating in and adapting to the actual world beyond therapy; and (5) fundamentally transforming who we are' (p. 67). The person-centered approach must be lived in the wider world if it is not to be enslaved in the cultural conditioning in which it originated and limited to the problems of individuals in isolation (Cornelius-White, 2006b; Cornelius-White and Anderson, 2007). The person-centered approach is an approach to life, not just to therapy.

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