

The Nondirective Attitude: An Interview with Nathaniel J. Raskin

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Introduction

I interviewed Nat Raskin via email in the fall of 2005. I have known Nat since I was a student of his at Northwestern in the 1980s, and I was pleased and honored to have the opportunity to probe his memory and thoughts about his classic unpublished article, the circumstances in which he wrote it, and his life and developments in person-centered therapy since then. The interviews were edited for publication.

Ray Adomaitis: Nat, It's a great honor to have this opportunity to talk with you about ideas you penned nearly six decades ago, prior to publication of the major works that give clarity and visibility to person-centered theory and practice. Your observations in this important paper also influence the continuing debate over the nature and respective contribution of client and therapist to successful outcome in psychotherapy. Some researchers now position the client as the "architect" in therapy, something you've been saying for years. As a former student of yours who's read a number of your papers, many of which you've published only recently (Raskin, 2004) or not at all, I'm happy to see this paper finally come to light, and I'm eager to explore it with you. I can't help but wonder as we start, why you didn't publish this paper until now?

Nat Raskin: Originally, I was content to direct it to the University of Chicago Counseling Center staff. Now, I thought it would be of historical interest. Also, I have found that my writing has meaning and is of interest to a very general audience, for example, to my next-door neighbor who is an attorney, to a friend of one of my daughters who trades in metals, to an architect, and others.

Ray: Where does this paper rank among your own body of works? Among your most memorable?

Nat: Yes, because it was my earliest and because Carl Rogers found it of value and encouraged me to share it with others at the Counseling Center.

Ray: I've heard you and Carl talk some about those early years, and formed this image of a newly organized group of young therapists selected and headed up by Carl, and individually, perhaps uniquely driven by a radically new, nondirective, view of counseling. What was it about the movement or times that made it personally rewarding or exciting for you?

Nat: The fact that it was new, that it was ground-breaking in seeing the client as the architect of the process, with the therapist serving as a facilitator rather than an expert who will guide. And I loved being part of a group, some of whom, often with their spouses and children, became close and valued friends and with whom I socialized after work.

Ray: Did you have the sense then that you were breaking new and important ground?

Nat: Yes.

Ray: Did you see and talk with Carl and the core staff on a daily basis, and did everyone have a specific role within a clear hierarchy as I/O psychologists advise? How did work get done in the Chicago Counseling Center command center, so to speak? It was spectacularly productive and successful.

Nat: The phrase “command center” doesn’t fit; it has a military connotation. We were anything but. In regard to your other question about how the Center operated, Don Grummon and Tom Gordon wrote an article (Grummon & Gordon, 1948) which addresses those specific kinds of questions.

Ray: You saw a broad spectrum of clients at the Center?

Nat: Yes, but client-centered counseling was not intended to deal directly with the problems of the clients. Instead it dealt with the client’s emotionalized attitudes toward his problems and himself. The nondirective counselor, for example, was not concerned with marital friction, academic failure, or homosexuality per se, but concerned himself with the client’s emotionalized attitudes and feelings about such things. No matter what the problem, the emphasis would be the same—the counselor would concentrate on the client’s expressed attitudes about his situation and particularly about himself. An adequate handling of these feelings usually led to deep exploration, insight, and changed behavior.

Ray: That gets at the very nature of client-centered counseling its voluntary, nondirective and trusting nature?

Nat: Yes, the important principle of nondirective counseling was that the client would determine when and to what extent he wished to utilize the service of the therapist, and this was integrated into the procedures of the Center.

Ray: How did ideas get worked out, by passing your observations or position papers back and forth, writing in the margins, in weekly meetings discussing tapes and therapy sessions? How did meetings between you, Carl, Bowman, and others proceed?

Nat: We did not usually share observations or position papers, or discuss tapes and therapy sessions in our weekly meetings. This kind of thing would be done on an individual basis. I remember talking over any particular question I had about a therapy session or about theory with one or two particular staff members with whom I felt especially comfortable. As far as how our staff meetings were conducted, you can get as I mentioned a fuller picture from Grummon and Gordon’s *American Psychologist* article.

Ray: Who did you feel particularly close with on the staff?

Nat: I felt particularly close to Bob Neville with whom I shared an office, and to Gene Streich. I spent a lot of time with Bob outside of the office; we went to lunch together and I babysat for him and his wife. Sometimes they would come home and find me asleep and their little daughter awake! Bob was not a “company man.” He was an independent thinker, as was Gene.

Ray: At the time you wrote this paper, Rank and existential anti-reductionistic and mechanistic philosophies were in play that gave weight to a theoretically polar anti-authoritarian stance. I’ve wondered what else, perhaps the very existence of your working group with Carl at the helm, provided the confidence or gravity to assert as you do in this paper the novel idea of nondirectivity?

Nat: I think it was the existence of our Counseling Center group in general. I was not the only one who believed in nondirectivity.

Ray: What was under consideration from a theoretical or practical counseling standpoint that motivated you to write this paper at that time? Does reading it again today bring to mind any particular problems that were being worked out at the time?

Nat: I can't relate the writing of the paper to any particular problems being worked out at the time. I think it came from my own experience as a therapist, my discussion with others, and my reading.

Ray: How would you locate the ideas in the context of the history of the development of person-centered thinking?

Nat: I believe they were a significant contribution.

Ray: In what way? Anything specific that stands out for you?

Nat: My description of what I called the fourth level of nondirective counselor response. It was good enough to be quoted in Carl's 1951 book:

There is a fourth level of nondirective counselor response which to us represents the nondirective attitude. In a sense, it is a goal rather than one which is actually practiced by counselors. But, in the experience of some, it is a highly attainable goal, which makes this level highly distinct, and changes the nature of the counseling process in a radical way. At this level, counselor participation becomes an active experiencing with the client of the feelings to which he gives expression, the counselor makes a maximum effort to get under the skin of the person with whom he is communicating, he tries to get within and to live the attitudes expressed instead of observing them, to catch every nuance of their changing nature; in a word, to absorb himself completely in the attitudes of the other. And in struggling to do this, there is simply no room for any other counselor activity or attitude; if he is attempting to live the attitudes of the other, he cannot be diagnosing them, he cannot be worrying about their relationship to him, the therapist, he cannot be thinking of making the process go faster. Because he is another, and not the client, the understanding is not spontaneous but must be acquired, and this through the most intense, continuous and active attention to the feelings of the other, to the exclusion of any other type of attention. (Rogers, 1951, p. 29)

Ray: Had Rogers proposed the concept of the actualizing tendency at the time you wrote this? If not, did the concept of the *integro* influence Roger's thinking about the actualizing tendency?

Nat: He had not proposed the actualizing tendency concept when I wrote this. I don't know if the "*integro*" influenced his thinking. I feel self-conscious about the term "*integro*" now. I wouldn't claim that it, or my observations about maladjustment had a great deal of influence.

Ray: In what way self-conscious?

Nat: I think client-centered theory could have done without it.

Ray: As I read the paper I couldn't recall if I'd seen the term "*integro*" before, it surprised me in that way, but it contains I thought the foundational growth principle or

force on which self-trust and trust-in-clients critically rests, and gives ground to a nondirective approach? I take it that was one of your main points?

Nat: I think it probably was. Reading your statement, maybe I should take back what I just said about client-centered theory not needing it.

Ray: How did you decide on the novel term “*integro*?” A composite term for integration and growth?

Nat: I think that’s the answer.

Ray: Do you agree with all you say in the paper?

Nat: No. While Carl supported what I wrote almost entirely, he differed in a few places, and I agreed with him.

Ray: Carl wrote that he found your paper “very stimulating,” and asked if you would pass it around to your colleagues at the Counseling Center. What is it that you didn’t agree with? Something you might have changed or thrown out looking back?

Nat: I think just what I’ve said about the term “*integro*.”

Ray: Looking over Carl’s notes in the margins, he asks you for minor clarification and prompts you for slightly different word usage. What stands out though is his strong approval of your description of the nondirective attitude, particularly the passage where you depict it as an alternative to the diagnostic attitude of “*knowing*” and directive method of “*treating*” clients, which you clarify actually “*constitute various degrees of impediment*” to experiencing with the client, and the unique opportunity for growth that brings. How did you and Carl arrive at that insight?

Nat: I believe simply our experience with our clients, including instances where we were directive. But I can speak only for myself, not for Carl.

Ray: It’s been many years now, but do you recall any instances, perhaps a client that you had when you recall feeling that yes this really works well –not diagnosing or treating but experiencing *with* the client? It dovetails somewhat with Blocksmas’s notions on thinking for, or with the client, and your dissertation in the late 40’s?

Nat: I think I had this feeling many times.

Ray: Do you recall any specific instances when you were “*directive*,” and not very client-centered?

Nat: No. I felt like getting directive in a few instances when a woman would talk about being abused by her husband. I felt like saying “*Why do you put up with that asshole?*” I restrained myself in the interest of respecting her capacity to arrive at her own decision about that.

Ray: That’s not to say that you wouldn’t share a feeling like that with her?

Nat: Yes. I would not share the feeling for the reason I have given.

Ray: As you know video demonstration interviews are common today, and often used in counselor training. Have you seen any “*client-centered*” videos that you felt didn’t represent the nondirective attitude well? Any stand out that do a good job?

Nat: One video about which I had reservations was the one I was asked to do to represent client-centered therapy for the APA’s Psychotherapy Videotape Series in the early 90s (Raskin, 1993). I felt so bad about it I asked them not to use it and to get Fred Zimring to do one instead. They said it was too late for that and anyway, I had done a good job. I have learned to live with it. I have seen quite a few videos and live demonstrations of client-centered therapy that have made me want to protest. As for any

that stand out favorably, there are many of Carl's, of course. And there are a number of people in the Chicago area person-centered network who have done excellent work.

Ray: What was it about that 1994 APA interview you did that you didn't particularly like?

Nat: I was conscious of the camera and there were times when I did not focus on the client who was not a real client but an actress.

Ray: Also, you mentioned wanting to protest some public demonstrations of client-centered therapy. What about them in particular?

Nat: They were significantly directive in spots.

Ray: Could you weigh in briefly here also on "focusing" and other off-shoots of "Rogerian" counseling? Is the work of focusing in your mind consistent with a nondirective, client-centered attitude?

Nat: Definitely not.

Ray: In your paper you emphasize the importance of experiencing *with* the client, which seemed to have gotten lost for a period of time, while the notion of "reflection of feelings" grabbed the headlines. Carl disliked how it came to be used, John Shlein favored it. Have you found it to be useful or distracting, or might we best stick with experiencing with the client?

Nat: Stick with experiencing.

Ray: You mentioned that you were content to share your thoughts in this paper with CCC staff, but I still find myself wondering how it is that this paper slipped past without earlier publication. What you say in 1947 following from your proposition and analysis of the "nondirective attitude" is staggering. Your description and Rogers' assertion, for example, that "science" has not been able to integrate and accept the idea that people have within themselves the "spontaneous" capacity for self-perception, integration and redirection strikes not only at the heart of client-centered theory, but seems as relevant and under-appreciated in the counseling field today as it was then. Did your ideas here just get swallowed up in later publications?

Nat: I guess so. I couldn't agree with you more about the relevance and under-appreciation of client-centered theory today. I don't believe that my ideas have gotten swallowed up. I think I have gotten a lot of recognition for my contributions to client-centered practice, research, and theory. I had plenty of articles and chapters in books being published and was busy practicing, teaching, and doing research. And I felt appreciated by my fellow faculty members at Northwestern, even though they had ideas very different from mine, and by my students, who were also preponderantly of other persuasions.

Ray: I'm glad to hear it. I had wondered if returning to your private practice and writing after how many years was it at Northwestern? That perhaps the dogmatic environment that characterized much of the field for decades hadn't had a hand in your unwanted, as I recall, leave from formal teaching.

Nat: It was over 30 years at Northwestern. My leave from formal teaching occurred because of a mandatory retirement policy when one became 70 which, for me, was 1991. It was a good time for me to leave Northwestern, because of a change in the head of the Psychiatry Department. The new person was not interested in my work. I left, learned to use a computer, helped establish an international PCA network and continued to do a lot of writing.

Ray: I wonder if you might comment on what seems to me a well-stated shorthand description for the elusive notion of client self-agency. You write that “the existence of an innate integrative force of insight of the organism to discover new meaning and alter behavior” is released maximally through a “catalytic” nondirective process of therapy. That conjures up actualization in a client-centered context, something that as far as you and Carl were concerned was not well recognized?

Nat: I guess it was not well-recognized.

Ray: You’ve been involved with the evolving field of psychotherapy research in various capacities, as an original, invited member of the CCC staff, president of the American Academy of Psychotherapists, and sponsor of numerous doctoral dissertations among other research projects. Could you speak to one or two research studies that particularly stand out for you? Is there any study that comes to mind that you wished you did, or think should still be done?

Nat: It’s difficult for me to pick out one or two. One study I would like very much to see done is to compare the empathic responses of different client-centered therapists. I think there is an assumption that we all respond the same way if we’re client-centered. I have a feeling that’s not true.

Ray: If I might return briefly to the subject of nondirective counselor responses. You dispatch the wooden parroting criticism to start your paper, pointing out that merely restating the words of a client is a gross misunderstanding of client-centered work. Then, highlight 2nd and 3rd level responses that are more constructive attempts to recognize and respond to a client’s feelings. What stands out here that you might clarify for me and many of my students is the notion of speeding up the process of insight or guiding the client to speedier adjustment. That is not consistent with the nondirective attitude?

Nat: The ideas of speeding up or guiding the process are clearly not consistent with the nondirective attitude, which looks to the client to determine the speed and direction of the process.

Ray: And, are you noting in your descriptions of 2nd or 3rd level responses instances of how the nondirective counselor responds similarly to the common practice of “directive” therapists, with the implication that it is a satisfactory way to proceed in some respects, but not ideal and not representative of the “nondirective attitude”?

Nat: Not at all! I don’t see the nondirective counselor responding similarly to directive therapists, who may help their “patients”; I certainly don’t see what they do as ideal or representative of the nondirective attitude.

Ray: A 2nd level counselor response then is an “improvement,” because it represents a more sincere effort to follow and catch the present feelings expressed and allow the client to take the lead in therapy, but it is a limited effort in so far as the counselor continues to be guided by his or her own personal interests and tendencies, and not exclusively the client’s?

Nat: Yes.

Ray: The major distinction you make as I read it then among these three response types is one of degree, where the latter represent incremental measures of success –though still limited, in giving up any goals of guidance by the therapist?

Nat: Yes.

Ray: And, clearly the 4th level response best illustrates the nondirective attitude as you and Carl intend it, where a counselor's clear intention is full and unambiguous empathic attunement, exclusive of other interests or stances?

Nat: Yes, the nondirective attitude is characterized most divergently from other counselor stances by virtue of the counselor's resolute goal, if not its full realization, to enter into the lived experiential world of another through empathic attunement to feelings and meanings, exclusive of other interests, stances or attitudes a counselor might otherwise assume.

Ray: And the distinguishing feature of the "attitude" of "non-directivity" is the counselor's exclusive and maximum attention to the feelings and meanings of the client as expressed without interest or attempt to otherwise guide the counseling process in any particular "therapeutic way" on behalf of the client, in contrast to other process approaches, such as advocated by Leslie Greenberg, just to illustrate one?

Nat: That's right.

Ray: Before we finish I wonder if you could define "attitude" as you intended it in your paper so we might be in agreement on that.

Nat: An attitude is a feeling or emotion toward a fact or state.

Ray: And, I'm curious to know in addition to this paper which one or two other papers of yours stand out for you personally?

Nat: "The Development of Nondirective Therapy" (Raskin, 1948) stands out because it was my first publication in the psychotherapy area. I had written an article, "Psychological Effects of Malnutrition," in the *Journal of Social Studies* in 1940 before graduating from the College of the City of New York, and nothing like that had been written.

Ray: That would be your very first publication then, as an undergraduate?

Nat: Yes. A second paper which stands out is "Becoming – A Therapist, A Person, A Partner, A Parent, A . . ." (Raskin, 1978). It was very personal and many people were surprised that I would be so self-disclosing in print. But I had accepted for myself what I had written, and while I hoped it would be a contribution to others. I was not concerned about what they might think of my being so open.

Ray: I remember that, and I suppose it so represents you in person and in print, the willingness to be in the first person. Has it always been that way?

Nat: No. I grew up basically a shy and retiring person. In groups, I would be one of the last to speak or I would say nothing at all. I was a late bloomer in terms of feeling at ease in a group.

Ray: Thank you Nat for talking with me and bringing this valuable paper to our attention. As I read it over for the first time just a few weeks ago and thought about our interview I've been reminded of the clarity of feeling and thought, and raw energy and excitement that you bring to your work and meetings of this kind, that very often feel absent in discussions about counseling and human nature. Thank you so much for your kindness and reminding me that what really matters in human affairs of any sort is the personal.

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