

# Uses and Limitations of the Non-Directivity Paradigm for Therapy with Families in Crisis

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**Abstract.** *The non-directivity paradigm is briefly examined in light of family systems theory. Purist and non-purist positions on non-directivity parallel the family systems perspective and the feminist critique of family systems. The complementarity of these polarities are asserted to be essential to counseling.*

Rogers (1949) questions whether a counselor should be willing to let a client choose goals that are antisocial, immoral, or self-destructive; in his answer he said that that “only as the therapist is completely willing that *any* outcome, any direction, may be chosen—only then does he realize the vital strength of the capacity and potentiality of the individual for constructive action” (p. 94). This statement articulates what might be termed the purist or idealist pole of Rogers’ viewpoints on the scope of the nondirective paradigm, a scope which is here seen to be unlimited. Rogers defended the purist viewpoint by contrasting it with “confused eclecticism,” (p. 85) in which a helping professional limits the scope of the non-directive paradigm and says to him or herself, “I will hypothesize that the individual has a limited capacity to understand himself to some degree in certain types of situations” (p. 84). Rogers makes the undeniable point that to be certain and unwavering on this point will yield theoretical certainty and provide clear guidance for the counselor in how to act, and reiterates that the more the counselor “relies on the strength and potentiality of the client, the more deeply does he discover that strength” (p. 94).

But is this a realistic position? Rogers himself issued at times contradictory statements on whether the nondirective approach can be applied in all cases. Earlier, he appeared to somewhat circumscribe the nondirective approach, saying that while it “applies to the overwhelming majority of clients who have the capacity to achieve

reasonably adequate solutions for their problems” it “cannot be the only method for dealing with that small group—the psychotic, the defective, and perhaps some others—who have not the capacity to solve their own difficulties” (Rogers, 1942, p. 87). While his statement is framed mainly in terms of client population, it also provides a larger framework to understand the issue—that the broader issue is the ability to solve difficulties in an autonomous fashion. Diminished ability unites the different populations of the psychotic and the mentally handicapped, and renders them potentially unsuitable for client-centered therapy, at least without adjunct treatment (see, however, Prouty, 1994, for one recent client-centered approach to these populations).

It is this non-purist pole that expresses a consensus opinion held over the years by many counselors, which stated that while Rogers’ approach works well for mundane issues and personal growth with highly motivated, highly functioning clients, it wasn’t appropriate for those “some others” with diminished capacities—such as clients in crisis situations who require a counselor be more active and directive (Presbury, McKee, & Echterling, 2007). It is likely that this “middle of the road” position characterizes the majority of practicing clinicians. Indeed, at the recent ADPCA conference, skepticism was expressed by some as to how practical it was to be radically noninterventionist and person-centered. As illustrated by poignant anecdotes, clinicians face at times life-threatening challenges in applying a purist position. In one case, a clinician did not intervene to prevent a client in a group home from harming another client in that home. The clinician was devastated, wondering if she should have set aside her noninterventionist stance in favor of a more active, directive approach. Trusting fully to the individual’s capacity to take constructive action is not for the fainthearted, especially when that individual is in crisis.

The situation is as challenging, if not more so, when the treatment unit is the family. Embedded in the history and development of family therapy has been the revision of general systems/cybernetics theory (Bateson, 1972; Bertalanffy, 1968) through feminist critiques about the lack of accountability in these theories (Goldner, 1985; 1993; Hare-Mustin, 1978; 1986). These critiques provide a map for the dilemmas that can arise when attempting to implement a nondirective

(i.e., systems) paradigm with a family. Issues of power and hierarchy suffuse normal family functioning, and are certainly at least as prevalent, if not more so, when a family begins to experience dysfunction. From a systemic, nondirective, and noninterventionist perspective, the viewpoints and actions of all the family members recursively interact to produce their family system. However, depending on age and gender, a viewpoint may carry more or less weight. With children involved, and with issues of power, control and gender present, then non-directivity in family therapy, like a systems orientation, is open to critique.

Rather than assuming that a family in crisis is fully capable or fully incapable of finding adequate, ethically balanced solutions to its problems, a further exploration of the nondirective paradigm is needed. Rogers (1949) himself makes the evocative statements that the basic philosophical attitude of the counselor “may be adopted tentatively and partially, and put to the test” and that “the possibility of self-understanding is still, for this client, a completely unproved hypothesis” (p. 84). These statements resonate with the various theorists in family therapy whose work compliments person-centered approaches, such as Narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) and the Milan school (Boscolo, Cechhin, Hoffman, & Penn, 1987) and their interest in circular questioning (Penn, 1982), which can serve to make explicit the interactions and the power hierarchies in a family. These approaches have generated some of the more sophisticated explications of the uses and limitations of curiosity and nonintervention, and would provide a good “marriage” with Rogers’ more tentative formulation.

In coupling family therapy and the person-centered approach, which some theorists see as a harmonious relationship (e.g., Gaylin, 2001), perhaps it would be useful to resurrect the at-times discredited term of complementarity. As Goldner (1985) observes, this term, as applied to couples, has paralleled the sociological notion of sex roles. While it perhaps mistakenly gives socially constructed norms an aura of biological and psychological determinism, yet if one recognizes how it is structured by social context, complementarity itself can still be of some use. That is, the complementarity between nondirective and directive approaches is a polarity inscribed into the counseling

relationship itself. It may be that this is one of those never-ending arguments between vitally linked concepts (or people) that refuse to die because if the argument were finally answered, the relationship would end. Counseling is constructed from these vitally linked arguments: research versus practice, idealism versus realism (at the conference, those who were seen as ideological purists were described by one clinician as “idealistic academics”), change versus acceptance, “circular thinking” versus “linear thinking,” and so on.

There is clinical utility in intersecting the nondirective paradigm with the aforementioned debate in family therapy, along with linked arguments about authority (Nichols, 1993), constructivism (Minuchin, 1991), and deconstruction (White, 1993) and the therapeutic uses and misuses of philosophers such as Foucault (Fish, 1993; Redekop, 1995) who analyze power and power relationships. Accounting for power differentials while maintaining a systems orientation is a key attitude for the family therapist, one that permits both the generation of hypotheses about the family as well as accountability for choices made or not made to implement these hypotheses. Counselors continually generate hypotheses about how far they might go to will *any* outcome, *any* direction. Sixty years after Rogers’ (1949) statement, how counselors answer the question of non-directivity with individual and family clients remains at the heart of the therapeutic enterprise.

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