

Book Review

Carl Rogers' Helping System: Journey and Substance

Godfrey T. Barrett-Lennard

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Godfrey Barrett-Lennard's Carl Rogers' Helping System: Journey and Substance presents its reader an opportunity to go back to the beginnings of client-centered thinking, savor its evolution and surmise upon the future of the person-centered movement. Since the author was a student and colleague of Rogers at the Chicago Counseling Center in the 1950's, the book is a culminating work, a synthesis and reworking of Barrett-Lennard's nearly half-century of immersion and leadership in the person-centered approach. As suggested by the title, Barrett-Lennard describes the person-centered approach as a system and its history as a journey. He attempts to illustrate the complexities and influences of time, place, persons, research, theory, practice and experience within, about, upon and growing out from the seeds of nondirective thinking. The multilayered complexity of purpose and theme, the gentle, persistent style of prose, and the historical and personal voice that courses throughout the book qualify this volume as a work of art as well as a fine reference tool.

In addition to being a thorough history of the approach, the book serves as an invaluable annotated bibliography. In each chapter, whether it is historical, theoretical, or topical in nature, relevant literature is described and informs the structure. While reading, it was repeatedly delightful for me to stumble upon references to articles and books that I now look forward to perusing. The bibliographical nature of the work is complemented by a very good index.

The author's footnotes are a delight, a mini-tome in themselves of anecdote, reference, clarification and controversy. For instance, in the index, there is a listing for "transference". Transference is mentioned in only one place, a footnote attached to a discussion of therapist communications of warmth and caring toward clients. This particular footnote (p.100) is a prime example of the author's generous style of thematic, historical, personal and reference-laden meanderings:

...in the final reading of my text for this book, it struck me that the notion of unconscious 'transference' in the client-therapist relationship - so dear to the thought of psychodynamic therapists - should at least be acknowledged. Rogers devoted a chapter of Client-centered Therapy (1951) to 'questions raised by other viewpoints', including transference, and the concept has not simply been ignored by Rogerians. A notable, later case in point is the

searching and evocative examination by Shlien in his 'counter theory of transference'(1987), and the series of responding papers also published in the 1987 volume of the Person-Centered Review. My own contribution to the topic appears within an article in another journal (Barrett-Lennard, 1985b).

In the opening, historical unit, after introducing Rogers and the development of his thinking, the author describes the social historical and literary backdrop to the beginnings of the person-centered approach. National themes appearing in the 1920's through the 1940's, through the Great Depression, New Deal and World War II, are compared to the premises of nondirective therapy. Parallels are drawn between two vital revolutionary figures, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Carl Rogers.

These chapters of history and confluence are followed by discussion of the theoretical foundations of the approach. In the author's view, systems of thought tend to have an early, foundational, vigorous and cohesive phase, before evolving outward into pluralistic stages and convolutions. He has dubbed the era beginning at the earliest with the publication of Counseling and Psychotherapy in 1942 and ending in the early sixties, after Rogers moved to California, the "school phase of client-centered therapy".

Statements in a chapter titled "The Helping Interview" tend to be distilled into a carefully nuanced essence of nondirective, client-centered therapy. However, simultaneously, Barrett-Lennard brings in what he considers to be innovative threads of interest. For example, he writes that according to Rogers, "...processes of deeply attentive, sensitive listening and resonance and of expressive, empathic responding may be said to comprise the manifest 'work' of the therapist-interviewer". Then he states that "Gendlin adds as a further aspect of this work, critically linked to listening, the feature of helping the other to 'focus'"(p.93). Although Barret-Lennard distinguishes between the many voices within his text, assimilating the democratic richness of the author's intent to be inclusive carries with it the exercise of sifting through the pluralist threads.

"The Course of Therapy" chapter is a reworking of his long time germinating thoughts on the process path of psychotherapy. The material is compelling reading whether one's momentary mindset is that of client or of therapist. In charting this path, the author is careful to limit himself to describing, not prescribing, stages of psychotherapy. Again though, in this chapter, he weaves an openness to experiential thinking in with his complex view of the client-centered approach. So, for example, in his concluding statements about the sequential phases of therapy (p.122) he mentions that

Therapists particularly influenced by Rogers' later process thinking and, especially, by Gendlin and others of more 'experiential' persuasion, may have greatest interest and confidence in therapy that clearly moved to the Phase D level of process. For therapists of either emphasis, working with clients in Phase D probably helps most in the therapist's growth.

In succeeding chapters, implications for practice of the person-centered approach in different areas are covered. These areas include working with children and families, groups of many sorts, education, administration and conflict resolution.

Nearly one hundred pages are dedicated to a review of client-centered and related research. These research chapters are important reading for anyone embarking for the first time on psychotherapy research. Due in part to his participation in a significant chunk of the research discussed here, Barrett-Lennard is able to describe in personally-informed detail the thinking that imbues empirical work. It was he who developed and created the Relationship Inventory (RI) in 1959 and subsequently revised it. This measure has been extensively used as a research instrument, even outside of client-centered research, for the last forty years. A strong, personal and appealing invitation is issued to readers to embark on research efforts. This reader is thoroughly disinclined toward research. Nonetheless, the author's insider description of the extensive creating, validating and implementing of the RI tempted even me to ponder ideas to forward research and documentation about therapy. I found myself wanting to take a peek at the RI, wondering if I might want to use it as a before, during and after instrument in my own work.

The chapter on "Development of Therapists and Facilitators" annotates and complements what has been, at least up until the recent book by Mearns, a relatively small pool of literature on the subject of consultation and training. A detailed description of present day person-centered training programs around the world is included.

The final chapter, "Openings in a Dynamic Continuity", reexamines the roots and foundations of client-centered therapy with a futuristically critical and creative, systems-informed eye. Barrett-Lennard emphasizes developing therapist sensitivity to client engagement systems, as opposed to hearkening only to the client's self in development. He says that "...the philosophy has treated the individual - in whom living experience resides - as central, and regarded groups and other engagement systems as settings rather than being at the core of life" (p.358). He suggests that if we acknowledge that wide varieties and levels of human engagement are at the heart of living, "...we need to supplement the core conditions theory, or situate it within a wider model" (p.368).

This reviewer is dubious about any change in theory that arises from therapists' individual or collective sense of what is or is not of central importance to clients in general. I question the author's acceptance of divergent voices within one fold. My concern is loss of the universal relevance of Rogerian theory. With respect to input from systems theory, mightn't the ethical and theoretical fork, the practitioner's choice to honor the client's sovereignty, be lost in a confused mingling of therapist intentions based upon concern for multiple realities instead of the client's phenomenological sphere?

In the end, I highly recommend this book as a reference source of major import, as bibliography, as history, as art, and as a complex discussion of questions that plague the person-centered practitioner and the client-centered therapist. I share Barrett-Lennard's excitement in looking forward to discussion that arises in response to the salient and controversial thoughts he offers.

Reviewed by:
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