PERSON-CENTERED THERAPY
AND SPIRITUALITY:
The Art of Knowing and
Self-Determination

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ABSTRACT. The authors invite the reader to a closer look at the person-centered approach within the increasing trend toward transpersonal approaches to therapy. The article addresses values in contrast to dogma and emphasizes the client's freedom to self-determination in the context of spirituality.

Saying that we live in an age of change and transition is a cliché, but it is true nonetheless. Postmodern philosophy signifies that values that once gave structure and meaning to life have been falling apart for at least the last hundred years. A big change of lifestyle has always brought with it an enormous effect on attitudes, human behavior and sexuality, and moral and spiritual standards and beliefs (O'Hara, 1992).

The crumbling of an old order has both good and bad aspects. When institutions, religions, and historical values lose their influence, predictability and security are diminished; nothing can be taken for granted. Issues like family structure and management, influence, power, and equity in long-term relationships that before had been ritualized have now become subjects for thought, debate, and anxiety, with no clear guides for behavior (Lee, 1987). Not only is there an absence of external stability and order, but the internal guidelines aren't working so well either. People can decide to try to live by the old rules, but this is not without problems. For other people those rules are no longer acceptable, and fellow humans that have decided to live by the old rules might be considered strange or old-fashioned. All of a sudden, people do not know what to believe. They find themselves searching for answers, for solace, spirituality. Some of them search in therapy sessions.
As traditional ways of life are changing, we are not only increasingly free to choose our own way of life, but we are actually obliged to do so (O’Hara, 1992). Assuming the freedom to be who you are, think what you think, say what you mean, search for meaning in your own way, and make your own choices takes individual courage and responsibility.

Consciously breaking with conventions of our past, we choose the consequences that come with those choices. This is no small thing. While it seems there is no way of going through life without paying the price of personal freedom, if you are careful and conscious about it, you can have a say about what religion or spirits to believe in.

**Values vs. Dogmatism**

When therapists or counselors insist their personal values do not play a part in their psychotherapy, I become suspicious. Values are an integral part of life. They are an important motivating force whether we acknowledge them or not. Even person-centered therapists have definite values and ideals, although the approach emphasizes its respect for the client’s freedom to self-determine his or her values and directions. The authors believe that most of us find it easier to be empathic with a victim rather than the perpetrator despite our knowledge that we, too, are violators of some sort from time to time in our personal lives. A client who shows more awareness and acceptance of his or her inner process and fluidity might get more passionate positive regard from us, which then becomes reinforcing of that newly acquired self-awareness (Villas-Boas Bowen, 1996).

In order to avoid such an undesirable subliminal behavioral reinforcement, I think it is vital to acknowledge social and spiritual values as personal not only to ourselves but also to our clients. Presenting our values and beliefs as personal in the therapeutic encounter instead of letting them “leak” to our clients preserves the client’s freedom to self-determination. Rogers, describing his new concept of therapy, emphasized that the most important aspect of the person-centered approach is the open therapeutic person-to-person relationship itself.

In all the other [therapeutic] approaches mentioned, the individual is expected to grow and change and make better decisions after he leaves the interview hour. In the newer practice [PCA] the therapeutic contact is itself a growth experience.... Certainly this type of therapy is not a preparation for change, it is change (Rogers, 1942, p.30).

Religious and/or spiritual confinements are only two among many dogmas that can constitute therapeutic obstacles. Atheism with science as its new god or the attempt to “preach the gospel of the Person-centered Approach” according to Carl Rogers are other frameworks that can stifle human development. One challenge of the person-centered approach is honoring, acknowledging and living by our values without claiming that our personal values are the most healthy and beneficial ones and, therefore, should be adopted by everybody else. Keeping them hidden in order not to unduly influence clients I see as detrimental, even dangerous, to our clients’ mental health.

In developing a structured and permissive therapeutic relationship, we face at least two risks. The first risk is institutionalizing an approach that wants to be centered around persons
and not institutions. The second risk is the tendency to become overly pervasive. This gets manifest in an inability to discriminate what values or therapeutic structures are adaptable and which are not. We are facing the temptation to adapt the person-centered approach to one-session brief psychotherapy while trying to incorporate alternative lifestyles or religious beliefs such as Buddhism (Epstein, 1995). In the attempt to become all-encompassing, we share responsibility for what are described as person-centered values. One of these values involves a high degree of self-awareness of our personal values and ideals as therapists (Rogers, 1949; Mearns, 1997). While there are many personal values that influence the therapeutic process, from here we will look at the person-centered approach only from a spiritual point of view.

Spirituality, The Art of Knowing and Self-Determination

Spirituality

Mystical experience can be found in all cultures, races, and ethnicities. Religious and spiritual beliefs have been part of human existence for as long as there are records of human life (Campbell, 1988).

In human history, nothing seems to have had as dramatic an impact on human lives as religious and spiritual beliefs. Nothing has led people on to go to war as often and tragically as the spirit they claimed that moved them. Therefore, it appears inevitable for an approach centered on the person to take into account one of the most influential aspects of human existence, if the person-centered approach is a framework for understanding the nature of the person.

Further, it is crucial to focus briefly on the distinction between religious or spiritual institutions and spirituality. Institutions represent the spirit they claim to be moved by only to the degree that they actualize that “spirit” as a process and not a dogma. No single institution represents universal truth. They are all partial, geographical, local, as are their truths.

The bible seems to remind us that spirituality and truth are multiple by nature. In the Book of Genesis (“Then God said, ‘Let us make [wo]man in our image, after our likeness...’”), God is presented as a plural manifestation (Genesis I, 26). Buddhist philosophy states that Buddha nature dwells within us and that we should honor ourselves and see the God in each other (Brazier, 1995).

Rogers pointed out that “Individuals have within themselves vast resources for self-understanding and for altering their self-concept, basic attitudes, and self-directed behavior” (Rogers, 1980). This inner wisdom and the self-regulatory capability of a person’s development is considered a key concept of the person-centered approach.

Based on his study of Jungian psychology and other transpersonal concepts, Rogers suggested that an interconnectedness beyond the individual experience is too convincing to be dismissed. He was led to the tentative opinion that "All these accounts indicate that a vast and mysterious universe - perhaps an inner reality, or perhaps a spirit world of which we are all unknowingly a part - seems to exist" (Rogers, 1980).
The Art of Knowing and Self-Determination

Quantum physics strongly suggests that we live in a holographic universe that cannot be separated into independently existing parts. In our wondrous universe each part involves all the others; mysteriously contains or enfolds them (Wilber, 1985).

One aspect of person-centered therapy is a systemic way of assisting people at tapping into their own inner wisdom, realizing and developing their own beliefs and attitudes freely (Rogers, 1980). In an atmosphere of social impunity, people tend to share these discoveries with empathic other selves. We seek to find what is the truth both of the world and of ourselves. Two unique worlds are attempting to move together in these worlds: “Do you see what I see?”; “What do you see?”, “Let’s see what we can see together, in this moment.” We do this to both affirm and confirm ourselves in the world and by so doing polycentrically form our world together.

The significant distinction between the person-centered approach and other approaches to healing is that the person-centered viewpoint sees individuals as having already vast resources for understanding and altering who they are within themselves. That is what can be called an art of tacit knowing (Lee, 1987).

Rogers did not just write about potentials. He assumed that we are already complete. His deliberating theory revolutionized therapy as it had been known by constituting a shift from Becoming one’s potentials to a process of Being what one already is. Therapy was no longer a puritan achievement-oriented perspective. It became an opportunity for people to practice their art of tacit knowing. In that process, the therapist is a witness of the client’s self-acceptance, his or her own beliefs and attitudes. In the client’s journey to self-arrival, the therapist is a tender companion, a “hand maiden” of that tacit self-determination. The term “therapeutic relationship” doesn’t have much soul, but it describes one’s openness to the world and one’s realization that all we need already exists within us in the witnessing presence of an empathic other. Rogers stated, “Therapy is not a matter of doing something to the individual, or of inducing him to do something about himself” (1942, p. 29).

Despite the authors’ personal appreciation for dream work, meditation, and other spiritual practices, we feel an insurmountable resistance to calling the person-centered approach “transpersonal.” Although our personal tacit wisdom insists that there is a universal connectedness “beyond the personal,” we strongly believe that the possible damage outweighs the benefits of a theoretical inauguration of transpersonality.

Sometimes values, attitudes, and beliefs held by the therapist can interfere with a client’s self-determination. If the client’s process of self-acceptance involves issues with which the therapist struggles at the same time, the higher is the likelihood that the unconditional positive regard is limited. In other words, what is it that keeps the therapist from ever-so-subliminal and unwanted imposition of his or her own beliefs? What keeps him or her from hoping that the client become more emotional, spiritual, or universal despite wishing not to do so? What disservice do we do our clients if we hope or expect that they will become spiritual instead of being atheistic or non-spiritual as they may be?
According to Villas Bowen (1982), self-determination implies a person’s natural ability to assimilate only that which, in the long run, will enhance his or her development as a fully functioning person. If what I as an empathic therapist express to another person is not in harmony with that person’s self-actualizing process, it will less likely influence the other person’s development when I congruently state what my personal values and beliefs are. That is why self-experience is emphasized so strongly in Person-centered counseling training (Mearns, 1997). Being transparent by communicating that my comments reflect my personal ideals gives the other person a choice to reject my comments as what they are, my personal ideals. That in itself then leaves little room for victimhood. Without underestimating the power of unconscious forces on our lives, being a victim means being stuck in one’s personal development. It often means being compelled to mold to the expectations of others and shape to their demands.

Of course, we all know people who repeat the same self-destructive behavior time after time, blaming God, the universe, other people, and the circumstances for their misery. Part of psychotherapy is to deal with this “stuckness” (Villas-Boas Bowen, 1982). Physical safety and social impunity provided, we have the option of facing our demons and integrating healing experiences in our awareness. We might be able to turn our curse into our bliss by realizing that the only life we should be living is the one we are living.

David Whyte imbued the spiritual paradox into the following words:

It doesn’t interest me if there is one God or many Gods
I want to know if you belong or feel abandoned
If you can feel despair or see it in others
If you are prepared to live in the world
with its harsh need to change you.
If you can look back with firm eyes, saying
This is where I stand.

I want to know if you know how to melt
into that fierce heat of living,
falling to the center of your longing.
I want to know if you are prepared to live,
day by day, with the consequence of love
and the bitter unwanted passion of your sure defeat.

I have heard, in that fierce embrace,
even the Gods speak of God.

The way we understand his poem is that the spirit is not the same as spiritual ideas or religious beliefs. The spiritual paradox emerges in the fierce embrace of seeming opposites. The Gods reappear by falling into the center of being and longing. Their soulful reappearance melts “being” and “longing” into “belonging.” People long to be. This longing cannot be injected into another person. The soul would rather fail at its own life than be successful at someone else’s. The soul contains in itself the life that will arise. The event is only the actualizing of its thought.
That is why the person-centered approach ought to refrain from attempting to become transpersonal. Let there be room for atheistic and non-spiritual beliefs. We strongly recommend that the person-centered approach remain a viable option for the sake of self-determined clients that tacitly believe or don’t believe. By doing so it will continue to offer a faithful framework for understanding spiritual experiences of the individual person without imposing transpersonality on people who are something else. It would allow for transpersonal adaptation without transpersonal inauguration.

REFERENCES

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