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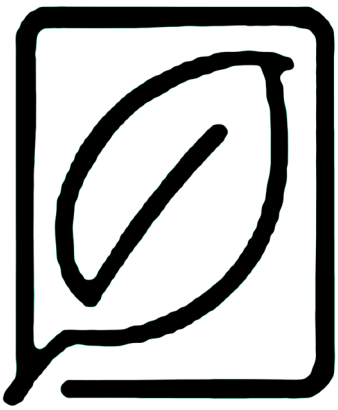

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THE PERSON-CENTERED JOURNAL

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Editorial

Jo Cohen

The Person-Centered Journal (PCJ) is celebrating 33 years since Volume 1(1) was published in 1992. The PCJ is owned by the Association for the Development of the Person-Centered Approach (ADPCA), an incorporated organization that publishes *Renaissance* newsletter, and hosts a website and online listserv. ADPCA also holds an annual international conference. The first ADPCA conference was held in 1986 in Chicago, IL (USA), which is also the location of ADPCA in 2025. Annual ADPCA conferences provide a stage for experiential and didactic learning, community encounter, and lived experience with client-centered therapy and the person-centered approach (CCT/PCA). The core ADPCA enterprise follows from and builds upon Rogers's seminal, empirical research and theory of therapy and personality change (Rogers, 1951; 1957; 1959).

PCJ is a platform for writers to publish studies on the approach. It seeks articles focused on CCT/PCA principles and practices that are applied to diverse populations and settings. It is concerned with exploring the boundaries and vicissitudes of CCT/PCA principles. Rogers's theory is robust and expansive, generating such questions as "Are the CCT/PCA principles necessary? sufficient? relevant? effective? for whom, by whom, and under what conditions?" Summary evidence for CCT/PCA principles can be seen in Wampold (2013).

One mainstay of the PCJ is transcripts of recorded sessions. Transcripts allow readers to observe the nature of CCT/PCA communication at a micro skills level. They are the best method for giving corrective feedback based on actual in-session behavior.

The PCJ invites articles that aim to connect theory and practice. For instance, I published an article on empathizing with client perceptions of counselor intent to inform counselors of "person-centeredness," in deference to the sixth Rogerian condition — the client's perception of the conditions (Cohen, 1994). Varied perspectives are shared in PCJ, with studies that validate the non-directive stance appearing alongside those

that integrate CCT/PCA with more directive orientations. The PCJ asks "How far can we deviate from CCT/PCA principles before breaching CCT/PCA foundations? If clients ask for direction, is it not more client-centered to offer than withhold it?"

In CCT/PCA spaces, criticisms are lodged against theories and practices that claim to be in sync with the CCT/PCA, but that arguably conflate and misrepresent the approach. CCT/PCA principles are not something to do before therapy. They are therapy. The true meaning of the conditions may be lost by erroneous assumptions of being incorporated into divergent schools of therapy. The PCJ recognizes not three but six core conditions of CCT/PCA relationships, including: 1) client-counselor psychological contact; 2) a client (student, patient, etc.) who is more vulnerable than a counselor (teacher, doctor, nurse, etc.); counselor attitudes of 3) congruence, 4) empathy, and 5) unconditional positive regard, and 6) clients who perceive the conditions (Rogers, 1957).

In this issue of the PCJ, Brian Levitt challenges us to free ourselves from the shackles of theory and embrace meanings and perspectives that can be validated by our personal experience. Levitt's invited article "It's The End of the World As I Knew It, and I Feel Fine: Reflections on Life Beyond the Person-Centered Universe," is based on his address at the 2021 ADPCA online conference. Next, in "What Is Essential is Invisible to the Eye: An Account of Person-Centered Curiosity," Matthew Bolton illustrates similar backgrounds and shared perspectives of Carl Rogers and Fred Rogers, two great thinkers, feelers, influencers, and nurturers of curiosity. In "Ethics and Psychotherapy: A Prolegomenon to Client-Centered Therapy Without Client-Centered Theory," Barry Grant discusses how the value of self-determination makes CCT/PCA an ethical therapy. In their study "An Integrative Person-Centered Approach to Fostering Counseling Engagement by Honoring Client Preferences," Michael Tursi, Rachel Jordan, and Marcia McCall make a case for expanding CCT/PCA relationships. They present a rationale for and examples of using different approaches to reflect client and counselor interests and to benefit client outcomes. Finally Elizabeth Teet reviews Grace Klein's book, *How Do We Become the Person That We Are? Creating A Life*, which celebrates the richness of a life that embraces CCT/PCA core principles.

My sincere thanks to the ADPCA for the privilege to help edit Vol 27(1) of the PCJ. Special thanks to the authors, and to Marge W., Shawn K., Jo H., Susan W., and Matthew P.

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It's The End of the World As I Knew It, and I Feel Fine: Reflections on Life Beyond the Person-Centered Universe

Text for a talk delivered online at the 2021 ADPCA Conference

Brian E. Levitt[1]

Introduction

When Teri Tivey asked me if I would like to present something, I think I said I didn't have anything I wanted to present. And then I said something tongue-in-cheek like "how about 'Reflections of an outsider, my life after leaving the person-centered community?' It's been 25 years since I last attended an ADPCA event." And then I realized there was something in that joke that I actually wanted to explore. And then the words kept coming whenever they wanted to—over breakfast, while cooking, gardening, walking our dog, in the shower (Why always in the shower? What's up with that?), and just before falling asleep or waking up. And just like I discovered working on my recent book, I knew this had to be personal or I didn't want to do it. I hope my words will find their way to you in that way. Personally.

Even though I am going to say some hard things about my experiences in the person-centered community, I am aware that only in a gathering like this am I likely to be free to be this personal and to present my thoughts in this way. And it is not just hard things—I have been blessed by so much that has come out of this community—most notably the enduring friendships and new friendships. I am also very aware that there are as many experiences of this community as there are people in it—mine may bear some resemblance to yours, or none at all.

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[1] Brian Levitt, PsyD, Cpsych, is a senior psychologist who practices in Ontario, Canada, in the areas of clinical and rehabilitation psychology, focussing on the intersection of psychology and the law. He is the editor of two books on the central concepts of the person-centered approach and is also the author of a book that explores what gets in the way of our hearing and understanding other people in our work with them.

Where I have come after all this time is honoring what is personal and turning away from what is impersonal. As a result, I have developed an aversion to theories about people and relationships and therapy. *I see these theories as acts of violence*. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

My Path Inside

So, where to begin? I think it would have to be my master's studies at Georgia State University in Atlanta. In the back of lecture hall, I sneaked books in with me to read. It was all multiple-choice tests and lectures that I couldn't connect with. When I look back, I can see I am not a big fan of lectures, being lectured at, especially if the lecture is impersonal. So, in the back of lecture hall, I read William James, Freud, Jung, Adler, Frankl, Perls, Skinner, Beck . . . and then Rogers. Rogers was the revelation. The first time I had come across someone who talked about a way of being instead of a way of doing, that understanding and being myself more fully was more important than understanding and mastering techniques. I found my ethical touchstone, my gateway drug.

My master's in Counseling Psychology nearly killed me, literally. I had a rather unlovely trip to the ER in Atlanta with a bleeding ulcer, where no one wanted to touch me because I am gay so they thought it must be AIDS. Going on for a doctoral degree wasn't really in the front of my mind. But I knew I had so much more to learn, and I found a doctoral program in Chicago that taught what I wanted to still learn, and they had Client-Centered courses. That's where I met Marge Witty, and I became her teaching assistant for Client-Centered Therapy. I was introduced to the Chicago Counselling and Psychotherapy Center, and not long after that I met Nat Raskin, Barbara Brodley, and Garry Prouty through the Center. I was in Client-Centered heaven, the warm center of the universe for me. One way or another, from the beginning of the 90s until my husband and I immigrated to Canada in 2000, I was connected to the Center: as a student, on practicum and internships, in Pre-Therapy training, and as staff.

In 1996, 25 years ago, I went to Kutztown for the ADPCA conference, newly graduated from doctoral studies. There I met Joanne Cohen, Alberto Segrera, and my dear friend, Carol Wolter-Gustafson. At the end of a community meeting, Carol bounded across the room with that energy I have come to love so much and said, "I have to meet you!" It turns out that *I* had to meet *her* actually, and the forces of good in the universe made sure of it. She has been such a constant of wonderful

friendship since, and one of the people who made life outside of the community easier to navigate as I found my way.

Somewhere in and around that time, probably a few years earlier, I had logged on to the CCTPCA email listserv and was introduced to just about the craziest dynamic I have ever seen in the field. Apparently that dynamic (or multiple dynamics) carries through space and time in the community wherever I have connected with its meetings (in person, the email listserv, and now on social media). The arguments and attacks are the same, with new people coming along and picking it up over and over again.

The dynamic dominates, at least from my perspective, and it is so easy to find myself pulled in and repeating the same old tired and often painful arguments—an exhausting focus that keeps me from where I would rather put my energy. It took me many years to figure it out and feel a little less hooked in by it.

Even the process of digging into it to understand it for this talk pulls me back in—and I will go there today, hoping to share what I have found moving through it and beyond it. The process of understanding has been healing for me—knowing where it is coming from helps me feel more grounded and able to hear it without feeling so harmed by it.

In many ways, I have come to understand that my experience in the person-centered community is similar to what I experience and understand already as a gay man and a Jew in the larger world. And recognizing this reinforces for me that I was right to leave and find friendlier spaces and connections.

When we immigrated to Canada in 2000, we didn't know anyone here. And I found my way in the field in Ontario as a lone non-directive-inspired practitioner. Aside from friendships, my remaining connection to the community was the CCTPCA email listserv, where the arguments raged on in endless email loops and threads. And I faced it from a more vulnerable place as a new immigrant.

During that time, I remember very clearly being struck by the gap in the literature on non-directivity. I was actually kind of blown away by this. How could there be no books exploring non-directivity beyond Rogers's landmark works? So I had this idea that there should be a book with chapters from as many folks as I could think of who understood the value of this way of being. I told Barbara Brodley about it and that I thought she should be the editor and maybe I could write a chapter or write a chapter with her. She was very clear, and warm, in telling me that I should be the editor. I also remember very clearly thinking, "OK, Barbara believes in me, but who the fuck am I to take this on?" And then I ran the idea by

Pete Sanders, who I knew through the CCTPCA listserv—and to my surprise he completely supported the idea, including me as the editor. Why he took that chance on me, I don't know. I have never asked. But that project changed me and my path. It was a labour of love. That book became *Embracing Non-Directivity: Reassessing Person-Centered Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Levitt, 2005).

When it was done and I had approved the final draft, all that was left was waiting for it to be born in print. It was published in 2005. I love this book and there are some people out there who get what it is about, and that has been wonderful for me to know. What shocked me, and I suppose I was naive, was the backlash for putting this out there: one non-directive book with low sales in an ocean of more dominant viewpoints and far better selling books. The two comments that stick with me the most are that it is just a book of fundamentalists, and that embracing was just a bear hug (in other words, soft and only about love). Those comments found their way in a bit too deeply. I still find myself arguing, "How can being open to how other people define, discover and direct themselves be fundamentalist?" and "What's so terrible about 'soft' and love?" and "Why is this book being reduced to that when it is clearly nuanced, and rich, and multi-faceted?"

Nonetheless, I still saw another gap in the literature that I felt compelled to address. There were no books on the actualizing tendency. I approached Pete Sanders again and proposed a follow up volume to *Embracing Non-Directivity*, and again, to my surprise, he said yes. That book is *Reflections on Human Potential* (Levitt, 2008a), and it was published in 2008. Barbara Brodley's health was not good while I was working on it and she was not up to writing a chapter but gave me permission to use any of her previous papers on the actualizing tendency. She died in 2007, before it was published. And then a year after it was published, Garry Prouty died. These were my non-directive parents, my mentors, my colleagues—my friends—and I felt orphaned.

While working on *Reflections on Human Potential*, I was increasingly feeling the need to leave the person-centered community. The discussions on the listserv were too toxic for me. I was also moving increasingly beyond the person-centered community in my daily life. Immigrating and my work took me into larger circles where I felt surprisingly freer to be myself than I did in the person-centered community, as a practitioner inspired by non-directivity, among other things. As I was wrapping up *Reflections*, I realized I had done what I wanted with my two books covering two essential Rogerian ideas that inspire me: non-directivity and the

actualizing tendency, which at heart hold the notion that people have both the *right* and the *capacity* to self-define, self-direct, and self-discover.

When I wrote my final comments in the last chapter of *Reflections*, I concluded by saying,

> Rogers once asked a simple yet profound question, "Do we see each person as having worth and dignity in his own right?" If you find this question meaningful, perhaps we share some unspoken bridges that allow us to travel beyond our own tiny fiefdoms, beyond the need to define ourselves or others, in service of the human potential and value in each person we encounter. (Levitt, 2008b, p. 235)

I remember seeing this book as a farewell after I wrote that, and I remember the comfort I felt knowing that I was leaving something meaningful in my two books. It was time to move on. I walked away from the CCTPCA listserv, and I stayed away from community conferences.

Patriarchy in the Person-Centered Community

Explaining the next part of my path through the community is only possible now that I am well beyond it. I was too close to look at it, and it was too painful before now. Not all of it was pain of course, but the other aspects of my experience are easy to think about, especially the connections I have to such beautiful people because of my connection to the community—but reflecting on that doesn't really explain why I needed to find my way out . . .

As someone who identified as non-directive in very public ways, I faced a steady stream of bullying in the community, typically from men, and now I am back after 25 years, to bear witness to that and to share where I have been. I remain as inspired by the concept of non-directivity as ever, though now I do, as I am saying here, prefer to see myself as *inspired* by this radical idea rather than labelling myself with it.

I am also back to share *where I am going*, because it is not just about rightful anger and pain (though that would also be enough and fine if it were).

> And I want to stop for a moment and say that I am inspired by:
>
> Barbara Brodley, Marge Witty, Carol Wolter-Gustafson, Peggy Natiello, Maureen O'Hara, Gay Leah Barfield, Susan Stephen, Kathy Moon, Jin Wu, Jo Cohen, Teri Tivey, Rachael Peacock, Maggie White, Barbara Malinen, Jo Hilton, Paula Williams . . .

and I could go on and on—but you see it, right?

I listen to women,
I vent with women, I cry with women, I laugh with women, and I connect with women
and then I feel more connected with myself.

As I started gathering my thoughts for this talk, my words were many,
daily explosions
gathered loosely,
a fairly disorganized mess.

And when I started trying to connect more deeply with my words
I was only vaguely aware of the patterns
and I went to bed.

And this came when I wanted to stay in bed and enjoy delicious sleep.
This came,
And I had to listen
And I had to let it out.

The Person-Centered Patriarchy Poem

I didn't write this poem

It wrote its way into me
It would not allow me
my last half hour
of precious
delicious
sleep.
It bullied its way into me
across 25 years
And I'm crying it back out.

I entered
your circles
wide eyed
excited by
the revolution
that Rogers
conceived

The community
was a shelter,
a home,
I thought.
And I danced.
I was free,
and I opened my heart . . .
and the bullying began.
And for years I let it,
and engaged it
and was battered by it,
Once again,
Once again,
Once again,

and the dynamic remains:
"What are you about exactly?"

"Define yourself . . .
Define yourself
in a sentence or two . . .
just kidding,
We'll define you:
You're too soft,
and too rigid.
You're withholding.
If only
you'd smile.
Do I see a smile?
You're just about love.
You're too fluffy,
You're too . . .
airy fairy.
Your voice is too shrill,
Your voice is too loud.
Why don't you just shut up?
Who do you think you are?
Are you saying you're better?"

"Why do you have to
be different?

Why do you have to
say you're different?
You're not different.
You're not special."

"You're a myth
You're not 'about'
anything—
but We
can be
anything,
and use your names
and silence your voices."

"You're not the revolution
You're a stone-cold orthodoxy.
Old and empty
and lifeless and cold.
Our numbers,
Our brands,
are the real revolution.
Don't look
beyond the numbers.
Don't scratch
beneath the surface.
Ignore that man
behind the curtain."

"The facts are friendly,
When We present them
and frame them
and define them
and use them
to pierce your heart."

If you don't move forward.
If you don't move theory
forward
If you don't develop
If you don't build . . .
If you don't build a city
and a Tower to the sky,

and make a name,
you are irrelevant:
dancing in your silly circles."

"I don't even know what you are."

"Tell me again,
what are you about, exactly?"
. . .

This poem came out of a loosely collected set of ideas I had been keeping in list form, which I was gathering under the heading: "the philosophical fucks." In more polite language, this was a list that grew from my understanding of logical fallacies I see in my work as an expert witness in legal settings.

I have personally experienced all of these attacks more times than I can count or even remember, and I have also seen these attacks directed at other people who identify in some way as non-directive, classically client centred, or rogerian. The patterns, the clusters, converged most broadly on patriarchy as the common theme, and emerged in my dream poem.

The patriarchal attacks come in three clusters:

- First we tell you that you are less than you thought . . . or that you are nothing
- Then we tell you who you are and we define you
- And all the while we redirect your attention to keep you off balance

First we tell you that you are less than you thought . . . or that you are nothing:

"**Rogers moved on — why don't we?**" From my perspective, rather than moving on he became more deeply and truly who he was. The themes in his thinking got richer and were applied more globally but did not fundamentally change even if the language sometimes did. Expressing himself and his ideas over time, the core is always there—late in life he still said, "I'm willing to stand by valuing the person above anything else."(Ryback, 1989, p. 106)

"**You're not actually non-directive**" This attack is based on the supposed paradox of non-directivity: that we are directive in choosing to be non-directive. This is such a mind fuck it is hard to know where to begin. It is basically a poor understanding of non-directivity as a rigid mindset imposed on someone else no matter what they want. At its most basic, this crude understanding of non-directivity is of a therapist

who is a steadfast parrot who can do nothing else but reflect or deflect and withhold when asked a question or to do something directive. This is just poor practice, not a poor theory. There is no paradox in valuing another person's right to self-define, self-direct, and self-discover—only potential for someone to be a poor therapist by imposing a misunderstanding of what it means to be non-directive on another person and not really hearing them. When you see non-directivity described as rigid, restrictive, or withholding, this is what is happening, and it is simply misunderstanding the approach as a concrete technique or rigid stance that ignores client direction.

"**The melting pot**" In other words, welcome to the colorblind empire, we are all the same. Tony Merry referred to this error in thinking as "Person-centered Anything." At its heart is a failure to value the differences that underpin our approaches, even if they look similar. It is pretty obvious to most people that a dog is not a cat, a dog is not a fish, a dog is not a bird. Yet the melting pot view goes something like this, "we are all animals." And if I say, "OK, and I am a dog," I may hear, "Why are you saying you're better?" So there is pressure to be color blind. Nothing is distinct, differences are not celebrated. Person-centered Anything becomes Person-centered Everything. This is sloppy thinking. Our differences matter and are beautiful. I don't have to be like you and you don't have to be like me. It also doesn't mean I am better if your values lead you to a directive place. There is a defensiveness in not being able to appreciate my views without boxing me in, putting me down, shutting me up, or saying it is no different and we are all the same.

"**Restricting the discussion**" The person-centered approach is much more than an approach to therapy. If you think the person-centered approach is just therapy, you can see how wrong that is when you look at the work of Gay Leah Barfield, Maureen O'Hara, Peggy Natiello and Carol Wolter-Gustafson, and Teri Tivey. I don't do therapy—yet all of my work is inspired by non-directivity, including legal assessments and advocacy work with the government. Discussions, nonetheless, tend to focus on therapy.

"**It doesn't work**" This attack was first notable at the time of the Wisconsin Project, when a group of person-centered practitioners wrote about their attempts to do the person-centered approach with people diagnosed with schizophrenia and concluded it just doesn't work. Reading the Wisconsin Project is enlightening, because it is soon clear if you read it that something very different was being tried

out. It was only later with Garry Prouty's non-directive work in Pre-Therapy that it was understood that it actually does work. When digging into research, it often becomes clear that the person-centered approach is not actually being used, or that the research model is reductionistic in a way that does not really answer the questions posed or asks questions that don't offer a more complete understanding.

"**Flat out bullying**" This comes from people who seem just to enjoy poking, perhaps knowing that non-directive-inspired person-centered folks will try to "understand them," and so they poke and poke and seem to have fun doing that. It is ugly and never goes anywhere. There is no real logical fallacy here—it is more of a stepping outside of conversations and attacking.

Then we tell you who you are and we define you:

"**Non-directivity isn't about anything**" The philosophical error here is attacking the approach by attacking the label—non-directivity as a lack, not about anything. You can see how quickly this falls apart when you say the same thing about non-violence. I think we all know that non-violence is actually about something, and we wouldn't say Gandhi and King were not about anything because non-violence suggests a lack and doesn't suggest what it is about. And if we are honest, non-directivity is clearly about something, also.

"**It's too soft and fuzzy**" This is a tactic of naming, labelling, and categorizing to control. It suggests that a non-directive-inspired person-centered approach is not defined well enough, as if an approach is only meaningful or a "hard and focussed" science if you can sum it up in a sentence or two. It avoids recognizing the richness and nuance of a non-directive-inspired person-centered approach by collapsing it into a category of fuzziness. The actual concept is quite simple to state—"people have both the right and capacity to self-define, self-direct, and self-discover"—but to deeply appreciate it and learn it and embody it takes time and a comfort that nuances exist beyond a simple reductionist statement.

"**Rogers was really a behaviorist**" Rogers did not work in a vacuum. Behaviorist language was everywhere and still is. The language of the times may obscure that he remained "willing to stand by valuing the person above anything else." However, it can be relatively easy to reframe what we see in theory and in demonstrations in behaviorist terms, and this has reinforced a manualization of Rogers that fits the dominant treatment models of our times.

"**Hijacking**" What Pete Sanders has described as old wine in new skins. This happens when folks are not really saying anything new, but they come up with different terms and brand names for the same thing without acknowledging it. This is often seen in what looks like marketing efforts on Twitter and Facebook that attract followers, and research, books, and articles that make employers in academia happy. Capitalism and the heart of a non-directive-inspired person-centered approach will always be in conflict. Personally, I tend to be more interested in people who are not making money from talking about this stuff, amassing followers, and making their academic employers happy.

And we redirect your attention to keep you off balance:

"**Mistaking a bad experience with a facilitator or teacher with the approach itself**" There are good and bad teachers, trainers, mentors, and facilitators in all fields, and maybe most of us are somewhere in the middle on that spectrum. The ethical value of non-directivity is not determined by one person's flaws or misunderstandings of it in teaching about it.

The "purity test" Pointing to my shortcomings in my responses to other people attacking me for being non-directive as proof that the approach is flawed. No, I am flawed, the ethical basis of a non-directive-inspired person-centered approach is not. "Wow, you are not very non-directive, look how you reacted to me being an asshole to you." This makes my reactions in a forum or group into the litmus test of non-directivity. While I generally try to understand other people, if you spit on me, I am not going to agree to follow your direction. If you crap on people that are dear to me, I am not going to follow your direction. If you shit all over ideas I hold dear and ask me to listen to you, I will not. Does that prove I am not really non-directive, that I am somehow a hypocrite? What a load of crap, and that's not my crap . . .

There are some additional attacks that are more clearly sexist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic . . .

The sexist and homophobic attacks:

"**It's not active**" Active vs. passive. Do I really have to spell this one out? Why is penetrating and going deeper all there is? It's tempting to point out that this perspective may suggest a very boring sex life. The notion that receiving another person is passive is stupid.

"**It's just about love**" I almost always hear this one from men. I can't remember the last time I heard a woman dismissing the person-centered approach by saying this. And what's wrong with love? Seriously, what the fuck? What's wrong with love? Why is it made fun of? As a gay man I know full well that being loving or sweet is perceived as weakness. But for me, when someone makes a real effort to truly understand another person from their perspective, from how they define themselves and their experience, this in itself is a powerful and fairly uncommon act of love. I may not set out thinking, "I am going to love someone by trying to understand them from their perspective instead of my own," but it is love nonetheless. This attack reduces the approach to a confined statement, a circumscribed set of words that diminish it, leaving out so much nuance, power, and depth.

The anti-Semitic attack:

"**There is no development**" there are variations on this: it's old and stale; it's dogmatic and in need of revolution; it's fundamentalist. I will hold off on this one for a moment, but for now I will say, as a Jew who knows who he is and has lived his life in two Christian-dominated societies, this one, for me, is glaring as an oppressive stance. And the double-speak and gaslighting are impressive.

Before moving on to a really old story, it is worth pointing out that all of these attacks build people up by tearing people down who in some way say the notion that people have both the right and the capacity to self-define, self-direct and self-discover is important to them.

Tower of Babel

I'm going to take a bit of a step back, actually way back, to reflect on an ancient story. It's a story that was first told long before ADPCA, perhaps several thousand years before. But we still tell it. It's a short story, of people who decided to get together and build. As I read it, they seem to have been saying this together, as a chorus of voices, which is a little weird, but that's how it's written. Maybe it was sung, which is kind of cool, but perhaps a bit dramatic:

> Come, let us build us a city
> and a tower with its top in the heavens,
> that we may make us a name,
> lest we be scattered over all the earth. (Alter, 2019, p. 38)

We are told, soon after, the tower fell, and the builders seeking to make a name were scattered over all the earth after all and left with countless languages.

As I said, it's a short story.

Fast forward a few thousand years to the present. This story holds for me the basic conflict in ADPCA, which is even in its name: the Association for the DEVELOPMENT of the Person-Centered Approach.

I was invited here to speak at ADPCA, and I am challenging the name of the organization. But it's a telling name. Why development? What kind of development is necessary? Change? "Evolution?" Promotion? And what does any of that imply?

Is a name benign or does it frame a way of seeing? The words we use shape our dialogue, and we are already trapped by them as if they are a truth. How does this name, that centers itself on development, affect us?

Does an organization with "development" in its name imply that what we have is not good enough for us to simply appreciate it for what it is? That it is more important to develop than nurture what it is?

Why must it be developed or "grown?" What is the motivation to build something bigger and supposedly better, to develop and evolve it? I find myself challenging the assumption some may hold that there must always be something better beyond what is already there.

What exactly are we saying? What are we striving towards when development of the approach is our goal, rather than nurturing it or ourselves, or developing ourselves? Are we trying to develop a better approach? Or are we trying to develop a better understanding of it and how we embody it? Are we suggesting that without a community to develop it, the person-centered approach would be undeveloped? Underdeveloped? Incomplete? Not fully-formed?

Development to have a name and recognition—development to promote a brand—development out of fear of losing power—development to gain power—development for the sake of development, as if that will lead to improvement. I am not comfortable with any of these motivations. And what is this need for everyone to speak the same language, see things the same way, build a tower together to the sky?

Somehow it seems more important to make a name than to be scattered over all the earth. Being scattered may feel threatening, all of us speaking our different languages. Yet when we get together to build towers that reach the sky "that we may make a name," we still end up scattered in the end, towers crashing down, over and over. It may turn out we were all speaking different languages all the while, having

arguments over nothing but towers that fall. Some are still trying to build that tower. To reach what? I have no idea. This goal doesn't interest me in the least.

Again, what are we developing? The theory suggests or points to *personal* development. Does attempting to develop *the theory itself* become a dodge, a distraction from our own personal development as we seek to understand it? Developing personally so I can understand people better as they define themselves and find themselves — building richer encounters right here on earth — that sustains my interest. That nourishes me. Learning what I can from every unique language each person I encounter speaks. That inspires me. That's more than enough.

And for that, I turn to everyday relationships with my husband and with my friends, kindred spirits who reinforce and nurture a space that allows me to live an approach, to embody it. In this simple, small, earthbound way, the failure of Babel can become a rich living inheritance. If instead of building towers that are bound to tumble, we stay here on earth and encounter each other in our fullness and uniqueness, billions of people all speaking different languages.

Building bridges to reach other people where they are, right here and now, that interests me. Theory, and developing theory, just gets in my way of being fully here and now, trying to build bridges to precious, unique worlds. I prefer nurturing to development when it comes to my own understanding—opening myself to other people finding their own way, not mine, not the dictates of a brand or cult. I prefer acknowledging that we really are all scattered after all. And what is wrong with being scattered over all the earth, like seeds, and connecting where we are at?

Maybe being scattered was not punishment. Maybe we were scattered with different languages to all find our own paths and value and to nurture something on a more personal scale, at a local and human level. Recognizing we all speak different languages frees us from following cults and people who know the answers for us, from building theories and schools of thought and brands that dazzle and distract from the reality on the ground. Maybe we were scattered because building a tower in the sky to make a name is not really development, and being scattered is . . .

We often hear talk about the importance of cultural differences, and for very good reason, I am never going to minimize that. But how good are we at even hearing individual differences of experience and personal meaning when we face people from our own culture or language who are using the same words we use?

And we gather where we tried to build the tower and perhaps rather than building another, we simply recognize that of course we don't share a language, that

it was a delusion. And that our tower, built as if we all shared the same language and vision, was a fool's game all along.

And some are still trying to build towers. And some want to follow people who build towers. And perhaps mixed into this city we have built that always threatens to come apart are some folks who are not selling anything or trying to build or develop something—just trying to be, to nurture themselves, and grow in themselves and their understanding of other people they meet.

Talking about development from the perspective of the search for something new, something better, brings up very old feelings in me. This comes from being a Jew in Christian-dominated cultures. I don't see Christianity as any kind of improvement over Judaism, even if it is newer. For example, I have a Book of collected spiritual Books, but apparently it is Old. "Don't read that, read this New one." Clearly, I am being told, it must be a lot better, an improvement. New and improved. A New Testament. What does it mean to say Old Testament and New Testament? Is the New supposed to be an evolution or development that is more important, that builds on the old and ultimately replaces it?

There continue to be spiritual, ethical, and philosophical texts in Judaism that represent an ongoing understanding and dialogue within a Jewish framework. It is an ongoing journey to find meaning in what we already have—appreciating its endless richness. And when we do this, when we breathe new life and spirit into our old forms, find new relationships to it and to ourselves, are we developing or simply plumbing the depths of what has always been there and finding meaning now for ourselves in our present world?

Growing up in the Midwest, living in the Deep South, and then returning to the Midwest before immigrating to Canada, I was often told that good deeds are not enough, you also have to believe in Christ. Similarly, it is not uncommon for me to hear that the core conditions of non-directivity or even just empathic understanding are foundational to other more directive approaches. The foundation is old and the other approaches are set up as new and improved—the foundation is not enough. This leaves unspoken or hidden the power of the original ideas to be explored and lived on their own terms. There is nothing old about Rogers's radical ideas nor about Jewish spiritual insights. From my perspective the ideas are still radical and fully alive and what needs development is my embodying them more fully—it is a lifelong journey.

I wouldn't call Christian texts Jewish and I wouldn't call Jewish texts Christian. And that doesn't mean that one is better than the other. I am very used to being

accused of thinking I am better simply because I am a Jew, accused of seeing myself as "Chosen," and being harassed for that. At the same time, I am distinctly inspired by my Jewish heritage, traditions, thinking, way of seeing the world. I am still told, "you think you are better" or "we worship the same God," statements that sound very familiar to me in the person-centered community. No, I don't, and no, we don't. I am just different and do not see myself as better for being different, and we see the idea of god differently in important ways. My heritage sits well in me, it is a good fit, and I do not want to be made invisible by melting into something bigger.

I also don't feel a need or desire to join as one large entity and define myself as Judeo-Christian. Quite simply, I am not that, and all this does is negate who I am. It is a view that sees me leading to something else, but never being complete on my own. This erases Judaism as its own ongoing spiritual and cultural tradition. It is an essentially anti-Semitic stance—that my heritage is the foundation of something new and improved but not enough on its own and not alive on its own. From my perspective as a Jew, there is no Judeo-Christian tradition. Just as from my perspective as a non-directive-inspired person, there is no "broader" amalgamated tradition where all that I am is a foundation that leads to something new and improved for others.

While I appreciate other perspectives, I find that a non-directive-inspired, person-centered approach is already truly radical from an ethical point of view, and nothing new or additional makes it more so. I think that the ethical messages throughout Jewish scripture, from the early metaphorical stories to the words of the Prophets and in the later writings and sages, are also radical. I don't see Christianity adding anything to that either. The traditions are already truly radical and alive when confronted, encountered, understood, and embraced.

In other words, I reject outright the notion that developing or building a *teaching*, a *theory*, or a *thing* necessarily makes it better or improves upon it. Exploring an already fundamentally radical ethical stance and discovering the meanings it holds for me in my journey through life leads to personal development. Non-directivity is already a paradigm shift that challenges a reductionist view of the world. And I choose to nurture it in myself rather than develop it through collaborations and research that dilute it or reduce it and crush the revolution it suggests. The revolution lives in me. And like a mama bear I am fiercely protective of it. I know its worth in the same way I know my own worth because of coming out in a homophobic society that would prefer me to be in the closet, and my worth as a

Jew in a Christian society that seeks to convert or expel or kill me or make me irrelevant. I won't agree to being defined by anyone.

All of this leads me to the question of how we can possibly develop or improve a fundamental ethical stance of giving up power over how people define themselves and direct their lives. I don't see any humility in that. None. Whatever is developed from there seems to me a tower bound to fall.

The radical paradigm shift that Rogers first described gets lost in debates about theory, reducing precious lives to definitions and theories and tests and techniques to teach — all of this distancing us further from the individual facing us in the moment. Talking in reductionist terms about something that cannot be reduced, that is, in fact, based on a stance that opposes reductionism, is a contradiction. Something like non-directivity can only really be talked about personally and free of theory, or we always come back to changing what is radical about it.

Rogers remains an inspiration to me, though I would not say I am Rogerian. I have loved reading for as long as I have been able to read. And I have loved reading the thoughts set to paper from great minds. When I see the titles of their books, I again see where Rogers diverges and emerges as radical: *On Becoming a Person* (Rogers, 1961) and *A Way of Being* (Rogers, 1980). He didn't name these books *On Changing Another Person* or *A Set of Techniques*. He offered a path out of authoritarianism—or as we might frame it these days, a challenge to the patriarchy. He is not alone in this. I am also inspired by R. D. Laing and Paolo Freire, who similarly titled books that point to a paradigm shift that challenges authority and explores how power is held and wielded and suggest an alternative: *The Politics of Experience* (Laing, 1967) and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972). These are all variations on the theme of valuing the person we encounter in their own right.

I love stories. I turn to them for inspiration time and again. Stories can oppress or free you, so we have to be careful when we choose to tell a story and when we choose to listen to a story and how we encounter that story. It's really all up to you. In the end, for me, the best stories are the ones I turn to over and over that come to life in new ways in me each time. When I come to them, I hope to be changed by them. But here, in the person-centered community, I found stories that diminished me and extinguished life in me each time I listened to them. Just as it isn't healthy for me to seek out a home in a homophobic or anti-Semitic environment, it is not healthy for me, as someone who identifies as inspired by non-directivity, to seek out a home in the PC community. I could come back in 50 years and there would still be someone to tell me I am too soft or too rigid or that I have to develop theory

(whatever the fuck that means). I had to leave this community of story tellers and story sharing so I could breathe free of the stories that are like traps for my soul.

My most recent book [*Questioning Psychology* (Levitt, 2019)] is an attempt to break free of jargon, to break free from the trap of theory and the control and reduction and distance it implies, and the violence we do with it, and to be personal. Not only is theory reductionist by its nature, so is language.

So is language.

Perhaps we are intolerant of the infinite nature of individual differences, or impatient. Perhaps our towers are monuments to our intolerance and impatience and we join each other with that bond, only to be returned back to earth when our towers fall, returned to the reality that we each speak our own unique language. The challenge of connecting here on earth with each other, personally, is always there while people engage in developing theory, in building towers.

I have no interest in developing a theory—I am only interested in humanizing it.

And so, I return time and again to a new mantra:

Fuck theory.

My Path Beyond

I found my path beyond or outside of the community simply by focussing on the work, day after day. This meant, to me, focussing on the folks right in front of me, in therapy and assessment work, and listening to my colleagues where I work, none of whom is person-centered. My path emerged without me realizing it, getting further from theory as I immersed myself in daily practice. It happened by just doing the work every day, and no longer engaging the attacks and arguments, the stuck places—by no longer buying into what feels oppressive to me.

Taking a few steps back, or twenty years of steps back, when we were new immigrants in Canada, we didn't know anyone here. No family. No friends. No colleagues. Unemployed. Facebook didn't exist. Zoom didn't exist. This being alone as a psychologist, a nomad in my professional journey, allowed me over time to experience the loosening of my ties to the person-centered universe as I began finding my way in Canada, a place where English is spoken, but very much a new land, a new world with cultural differences that slowly became apparent. I still had one foot in for a while, while working on my first two books and still engaged actively on the listserv. It was a transitional time for my thinking, a time of coming

slowly to really hear my thoughts as I was gradually leaving the din of the person-centered world behind.

While there are wonderful folks in Canada connected to the person-centered approach, I did not look for a person-centered community here. I somehow made my way from Toronto to Hamilton, where I now own,-a clinic with two other American immigrants that has become another home. And that home has become a place where I have been able to nurture my own thinking and come to hear my own voice more clearly over time. This was when I first started to recognize that I don't love doing psychotherapy, which was a struggle since that is what psychologists are supposed to do. But I got no fulfillment or joy from it, despite being told I was good at it. So even my identity as a psychologist began to loosen up, as I discovered worlds beyond psychotherapy.

I have over the years learned assessment and diagnosis and Freud and Jung and Skinner and Beck and Rogers. I have wandered into the strange world of psychological legal assessment and have found it immensely fulfilling. My job is to understand people who have experienced trauma, talk about what I understand in court, and face cross-examination from lawyers whose job is to humiliate me in front of strangers. I have also wandered into advocacy work, engaged in meetings with government and various stakeholders over laws and regulations that impact the lives of people injured in auto accidents.

I began in time to embrace my awareness of myself being an outsider—a Jew, a gay man, a non-directive-inspired psychologist, and an immigrant—and I found nothing lonely in it at all. As an outsider, I have a repeated experience of being outside looking in—a reinforcement perhaps of thinking about thinking and the experience that there are as many perspectives as there are people. The more I moved through these broader circles, the more I realized I didn't have to be in the person-centered "community" to nurture my non-directive-inspired thinking and being in the world.

Looking back, I can see the steady loosening of ties to definitions, to identities I first thought were essential. And this steadily moved me beyond belief in theories as real things. I became more aware of the power of letting theory go, the power in being more personal, and seeing and writing and speaking personally. I don't "believe" in Person-Centered, which is very different from saying I am not inspired by it. I am very much inspired by Carl Rogers's ideas, especially the ethically based notion of non-directivity. What still has a hold on me is a way of being that I find fundamentally decent, and a freeing awareness that this does not require that I stay

in a community that doesn't feel nurturing to me. I find I identify less with a community and more with intersections that exist uniquely in me. And I have found the joy of friendships that continue to flow from the person-centered community, despite the feeling of having left—these friendships are nurturing. Ultimately, I have found comfort in being a nomad and trusting myself.

It is clear to me how much richness non-directive thinking and being has brought into my work. And I realized a few years ago I still had something to say—a lot to say, actually. And I went back to Pete Sanders again. He gave me the opportunity to write my own book, which became *Questioning Psychology: Beyond Theory and Control*. Being given this kind of opportunity is a precious thing, especially when given the freedom to write it the way I thought it should be written. I remember thinking that this kind of opportunity might never come again, and so I threw myself into it entirely—I put all of myself and my understanding of this field that I love into it, word by word. I discovered my voice in the process.

When I was done, and the words were set to paper, I found myself empty. Nothing left. No creative force. No writing came. Reading, which is a lifelong passion, became a slog. And then last July, Jo Watson approached me and asked if I had a poem I might be able to read for a Drop the Disorder event. And I did, almost. Thoughts that I had been pulling together to speak at last year's ADPCA had been coming out as poetry. And rather than try to shape it into a talk I just let the words and rhythms come, happy that words were coming again after a long period of emptiness. When I finished writing the poem, I saw that it held much of my book and where I had come to in my journey. And I joked with my friend, Stephen, in Singapore: Why did I write a whole book when I could say it all in one poem? And his response, which will always stay with me, is that my poem is a distillation.

Here is that poem . . .

Let's stop pretending

DSM 1 isn't real.
Have you read it?
Have you allowed yourself time travel
to Mind Fuck Number1?
Ground Zero?
I've read it.
I'm a time traveler.
Let me tell you what I've seen.

It's very simple:
It isn't real.
It was replaced by 2 and 3 and 3R
and 4 and 4TR and 5.
And I've read them all.
And not one of them is real.
No matter how high the number grows
They are not real.

And I've been asked to swear an oath
on these shifting sands.
Labels that don't stand still.
Labels that flatten everything in their path.
Labels that flatten life
until it is unrecognizable.
Labels that are poison,
quick and slow.
Labels that don't make sense
Labels that blind and confuse and confound
Labels that don't define me
Labels that don't define you
Labels that can't possibly ever define anyone
Labels that can't be
any
one
Person.
Labels will never breathe
and be
a precious life trying to make sense
and simply live.
Labels are not real.

I've been taught them
tested on them
trained in them
and accosted by them
day after day.
I know what they mean.
I can speak the language.
I'm fluent in Mind Fuck.
I know how they're used.

And I refuse
to swear the oath.
They are not real.

Distress is real.
Your distress is real.
My distress is real.
It can never be contained
constrained
or explained
by a label.
It is alive in you.
It is alive in me.
It can never be named by a book
Or a panel of doctors
Or a single doctor
Or anyone else.

No one can name you
or me.
Their names for us are not real.

The names we find
and choose
for ourselves,
the names we choose
to inhabit,
those are real.
I want to know your chosen names
and if you find new names
I want to know those, too.

Your favorite theory isn't real.
CBT
Psychodynamic
Existential
Pluralistic
Not real.
The Tribes
of the Person-centered Approach,
they are not fucking real.
It's time to grow up now

and see
they are not real.
The Tribes
are a mind fuck
A racist appropriation
of a word that's not ours.
It Balkanizes a duality
(Directive and Non-Directive),
and fuels fights
we call debates—
pissing contests.
And Directivity is not real.
And Non-Directivity is not real.
And we've all been fooled
If we think they are real.
Theoretical approaches are all lies.
They are not real.

Don't sacrifice your life
Your one precious life
Your individuality
Your personal power
on the altar
of something that isn't real

Freud isn't real.
Jung isn't real.
Skinner,
not real.
Don't get me wrong
They lived
They breathed
They wrote
They were real.
And then we made them
each of them
into something unreal
while they were still alive
and breathing
and writing
and speaking

with beating hearts.
We made them into lies,
lies we believe tell the truth.
And we lie to each other
And we lie to our students
And we lie to ourselves
And we don't know we're doing it.

Carl Rogers is not real—
not the Rogers you imagine
not the Rogers I imagine.
Of course the man was real.
He once lived
and breathed
and had a beating heart
and wrote words that soar
over space and time.
His words found their way to me
His words found their way
into me
His words inspire me
They live new life in me
They grow in me.
And that
is real.

My respect for how you see yourself
is real
My respect for how you define yourself
is real
My respect for how you express yourself
is real
My respect for your own power
is real
You know when you experience respect
Your experience of that respect
is real
Your knowledge of that experience
is real

My books are not real.
I love my children.
But they are not real.
The words in them may reach you
They may soar over space and time
and find new life in you
and grow.
The life they find
in you
is real.
But these words on a page
They are not real.
Don't hold on to them.
Don't make them lies
by making them real.
They are not real.

I am real right now in this moment.
My voice is real
My experience is real
My beating heart is real.
You are real
Your beating heart is real
Your experience is real
Your voice is real,
and I want to hear you
and see you.
Each of you is real.
This moment is real
This moment between us
Right now
is real.

Let's stop pretending
That anything else is real.

What I See From Here

So where am I now, having journeyed outside of the person-centered universe? In simple terms, I am increasingly beyond theory, beyond control, and moving in the direction of being beyond beliefs.

My interest is in being aware of my ethical foundations, how I embody them, and meeting people where they are at, person to person, without a need to define for them, direct them, or change them. It is pretty clear and straightforward, even if it is hard to actually be this way and do things this way. I said earlier that I prefer to see myself as inspired by certain ideas and people—among the most significant are Carl Rogers and his idea of non-directivity. As an ethical concept or orientation, it is deceptively simple, but I am still learning what it means, especially what it means as I hold or embody it in relation to other people in my work.

Being asked to define my approach or who I am hooks me into a fool's game that is a similar reduction to offering a diagnosis. I am aware that the arguments in this community are dehumanizing because they force us to find some shared language and lead to attacking those who do not want to share it. I am also aware of how forcing a language or set of descriptions on myself is an act of violence to myself. And that truly pains me—I do not want to engage in my own harm.

I have books associated with my name, and for some people that may be forever who I am, regardless of how I continue to challenge myself and find myself more deeply. This is why I say I am more comfortable talking about what inspires me, and the ethical concept of non-directivity still does.

There remains a fundamental concern for me when I engage with other people in discussions about non-directivity. We can easily end up overthinking, intellectualizing, theorizing, and describing things with higher sounding words than necessary, and doing this we end up engaging in shared acts of violence without recognizing it. The personal gets lost. What is human and alive and present is lost. When I must objectify and define someone on my own terms, I've reduced their existence to a theory in my head rather than allowing myself to face the immensity of another person's reality in its own right. I end up destroying the reality of the person facing me.

I lose the other person,

I lose the encounter between us,

and I lose myself.

The price is simply too high. The violence done to another person's reality also results in the destruction of a relationship that allows two realities to coexist. It results in disconnection and isolation, ultimately losing a path to be more fully

myself. It is building a tower of Babel on a small scale, not acknowledging the value of remaining here on earth and building bridges on a personal level.

Theory is where the arguments seem to live—and our attachments to theory make the arguments impossible to win, and so we just do damage to each other. None of the talk of theory really matters to me anymore. I truly no longer find it interesting. What I still find interesting is the lived experience every person has and how they see and define it—not how I see and define it. It is not about the theory, it is about the other person.

Living without theory means living without a certain degree of structure and certainty. Living with ambiguity may be unsettling or frightening, but I am here to report back that it is truly a world of wonders out there beyond the person-centered universe. Every single person I meet is a world of wonders. I have fallen back to earth, scattered with everyone else, and I feel fine.

In a way, my lengthy education has been a tower of babel, and it has been important to me to let it crash to the earth, to unlearn everything, to be more present to other people. Gurus are great, but I find friends are better. I am no longer interested in demonstrations and lectures and training modules and people selling their wares.

Life is lived.

It's not theoretical.

It's happening right now.

And work is part of life, so of course it is also lived

and happening right now,

and not theoretical.

Here, as so often, I am inspired by Carl Rogers who once asked himself, "Do we need a reality?" He wrote

> the [. . .] only reality I can possibly know is the world as I perceive it at this moment. The only reality you can possibly know is the world as you see it at this moment. And the only certainty is that those perceived realities are different. There are as many 'real worlds' as there are people! (1980, p. 102)

There is so much to take in and connect with. There is no loneliness. I don't work with theories or movements—I work with people. I don't have relationships with theories or movements—I have relationships with people.

I still value truly meeting someone else as a person in their own right. It remains, for me, a revolutionary act.

This does not need any theory.

I'll say it again:

Truly meeting someone else as a person in their own right remains a revolutionary act.

This does not need any theory.

Walking away from community has brought me peace. It turns out that leaving is what I needed—distance and space and quiet and safety. Walking away has also brought me closer to my own voice, which was hard for me to hear above the constant noise and feeling under attack in the community.

People enter this community for all sorts of reasons, and it works well for many of my friends and may work well for most if not all of you. But as I look back, I connect with the metaphor of dance used so powerfully by Maureen O'Hara (2019), and I borrow it here:

> I entered the community to dance.
> When I realized I couldn't dance freely I left.
> And now I find myself happily and freely dancing at the edge.

Acknowledgments

I never met Carl Rogers. I first connected with his voice when I read him at the back of lecture hall during my master's studies in Atlanta. My connection to people in the Person-Centered community came soon after, when I met Marge Witty during my doctoral studies in Chicago and became her teaching assistant for Client Centered Therapy, which was probably in late 1991. All these years later I am lucky to still call her friend. Through her I connected with The Chicago Counselling and Psychotherapy Center, where I trained for three years. For those who may not know, this is the Counselling Center founded by Carl Rogers on the edge of the University of Chicago campus on the South Side of Chicago. By then they also had a location in the Loop in the downtown core. At the Center I was lucky enough to have supervision with Barbara Brodley (we met at her condo in Lincoln Park). Her beautiful voice is still in my ears and her clarity and fearlessness still inspire me. She was generous and open and we connected deeply with respect to the radical concept of Non-Directivity. The Center brought in people like Nat Raskin and Garry Prouty for us to meet and spend time with. Garry took me under his wing,

taught me Pre-Therapy, and became my friend. In 1996 I went to the annual ADPCA conference, where I had the good fortune to meet Jo Cohen, Alberto Segrera, and Carol Wolter-Gustafson. I then joined the staff of the Chicago Counselling Center in 1997, where I remained for several years until I immigrated to Canada. My other close connections in the community came virtually, through the CCTPCA listserv. Among the connections I made there I remember Pete Sanders and Jerold Bozarth most fondly. I enjoyed personal correspondence with each of them until their deaths. Pete went on to be my publisher for my three books, and also a man I considered to be a friend. And then there was Facebook, where I met Teri Tivey and became connected with an incredible and passionate group of folks all inspired by Non-Directivity. They created a book club with Maureen O'Hara to discuss her book Dancing at the Edge over Zoom, and they invited me into their warm circle, a truly special and singular experience for me. During the COVID pandemic I also have been fortunate to meet over Zoom with Peggy Natiello and Gay Leah Barfield, who have both been so gracious in our connections online. Our elders carry great riches, I encourage you to find ways to connect with them. And to bring things full circle, I am blessed by new friendships with Stephen Ong and Quang Nguyen, who are part of a younger generation with their own journeys that fill me with excitement.

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What Is Essential is Invisible to the Eye: An Account of Person-Centered Curiosity

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Abstract *In this essay, I share an account of person-centered curiosity as I experience it. My way of being from which this narrative flows was originally and still is inspired, in this and other contexts, by the late American child educator and television host Fred Rogers (1928–2003). My first exposure to the principles of Carl Rogers's person-centered approach came, indeed, as a childhood viewer of* Mister Rogers' Neighborhood *in the middle to late 1990s and early 2000s. Central to Fred Rogers's work was an enduring sensitivity to the emotional needs of children. Wonder, silence, relationship—fundamental ideas of existential-humanistic psychology—were things he considered paramount, and he often discussed his love of the Saint-Exupéry line "what is essential is invisible to the eye." This essay is an attempt to relate something of the meaning of that idea for me.*

> *The most important thing is that we're able to be one-to-one, you and I . . . [that] we can be present, to the moment, with the person that we happen to be with.*
> Fred Rogers (1928–2003; quoted from Rose, 2016 [1994 interview])

L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux. Fred Rogers, renowned American child educator and television host from 1968 to 2000, often related this favorite quote of his (from *The Little Prince*; Saint-Exupéry, 1943/2000)

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as "what is essential is invisible to the eye." In this paper, I attempt to relate something of the meaning of that idea for me, in my life as an autistic-ADHD person and as someone training in social work and psychotherapy.

My first exposure to the principles of Carl Rogers's person-centered approach came as a childhood viewer of Fred Rogers's *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in the middle to late 1990s and early 2000s (a topic explored at length in Bolton, 2020). Though unrelated and professionally unknown to one another, they both had conservative, religious upbringings and were concerned about the wellbeing of children. Indeed, some of the ideas which would later centrally inform client- and person-centered therapy originated in Carl Rogers's (1939) earliest work with youth.

Whereas Carl Rogers came to eschew the organized religion of his upbringing for its fundamentalism and formulated what was and is very much still a radical way of being in both life and therapy (Rogers, 2012; Rogers & Russell, 2003), Fred Rogers became an ordained Presbyterian minister whose mission field was children's television (Baggett, 2024; King, 2018). It may seem paradoxical, then, that Fred Rogers was quite progressive. For the context from which his views developed, Fred Rogers was, frankly, countercultural: His God was not strictly paternal; he saw sexuality as a spectrum and may himself have been bisexual or biromantic; he was famously anti-racist, hiring François Clemmons for one of the first recurring roles played by a Black actor in children's television; and he was a staunch ally of and advocate for the disabled and neurodivergent communities (King, 2018; Long, 2015).

Moreover, Fred Rogers was unafraid of approaching difficult topics and directly tackled difficult conversations. The very first episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* revolved around intergroup relations and was, in context, a protest of the Vietnam War. He later visited the concept of nuclear war with episodes referencing the tensions of the Cold War (Long, 2015). His strong belief that "anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable" was a sentiment he springboarded into regular conversation around wellbeing, unconditional positive self-regard, self-esteem, and many other topics besides (King, 2018). *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* ran as viewers know it today on American television from 1968 to 2001, but the earliest, Canadian iteration of the show debuted in 1962.

Central to his work was an enduring sensitivity to the emotional needs of children and not only the adults in their lives but the adults they would grow into. He recognized that the attitudes a child caught from others and developed for themselves would inform directly who they would become in adulthood (Bolton, 2015, 2020; Rose, 2016 [1997 interview]). *Wonder, silence, relationship*—ideas fundamental to existential-humanistic psychology (e.g., Kagge, 2017; Schneider, 2009; Valle, 2019; Woods, 2014)—were paramount in his life and work (King, 2018; Rose, 2016 [1994, 1997 interviews]; Sebak, 1987; Swift Fox Media, 2020). Fred Rogers, like many therapists and counselors (Blundell, 2024; Levitt, 2001), understood that from silence and "the white spaces between the paragraphs" (Rose, 2016 [1994 interview]) come understanding and personal meaning.

Psychotherapy Begins . . . and Ends with a Spiral

Wrote Fred Rogers scholar Melissa Butler in a 2024 blog post:

> A spiral winds itself around a point, its curve is continuous, expanding outward. There is a pattern in a spiral. It's countable, predictable, contained in its logic. It's also infinite, whimsical, expansive in wonder and awe. (Butler, 2024)

The concept of a spiral illustrating the simplicity, depth, and structure of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* encapsulates, for me, the potentiality of counseling and psychotherapy. In the therapeutic space, we facilitate the creation of an environment in which people unfold into being in front of us.

> Select any episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* . . . and select any single point: tie of shoes, neighborly chat, factory visit, Mister Rogers talking to *you*, trolley sound, moment with X the Owl, song with Daniel Striped Tiger, feeding of the fish, kitchen table, *Let's take a look at this*, knock at the door . . . and there you will find the spiral. Each point . . . holds this shape and invites the continuous curve outward. Each point is beginning and end, seed and tree, give and receive, go into yourself and out again. (Butler, 2024)

This passage contains, for me, a parallel to the therapeutic process, in that we can point to any moment of therapy and observe similarly that each can contain both beginning and ending for a person. Although the people with whom we occupy space may be challenged by life and the force of their daily experiences may knock loose the metaphorical décor from time to time, we are there alongside them with empathy and

appreciation and help them set upright anything off-kilter. Virginia Axline's (1986) account of working in play therapy with the child "Dibbs" (who may have been autistic) comes to mind. We relate to persons with simplicity and depth and, through our attitudinal intentions and (aspirationally) consistent warmth and empathic attunement, hold a contextual frame that is supportive of growth. The environment empowers clients to explore, understand, and even change their own contexts (C. Rogers, 1951/2003). Similarly Fred Rogers, viewing the space between himself and his audience with utmost reverence, constructed a psychological climate expansive to and facilitative of the socioemotional needs of his viewers (Harris, 2019). I liken Carl Rogers's endeavoring to foster spaces in which I and Thou are mutually observed to the frame Fred Rogers held in life and on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

> The essence of some of the deepest parts of therapy seems to be a unity of experiencing . . .. When there is this complete unity, singleness, fullness of experiencing in the relationship, then it acquires the "out-of-this-world" quality . . . a sort of trance-like feeling in the relationship. . . . In these moments there is, to borrow Buber's phrase, a real "I-Thou" relationship, a timeless living in the experience which is between the client and me. It is at the opposite end from seeing the client, or myself, as an object . . ."[2]

What goes on in therapy is, for me, about receiving and giving in a manner that occurs without any expectation on my part (Lauritzen, 2021; Rose, 2016 [1997 interview]). Where the person I am with goes, even into silence, I accompany them while providing a safe space for psychological exploration. Perhaps they will undergo some constructive change—but perhaps not (Bolton, 2023a). What is most essential is that the person I am with is and feels seen as a person and that I am real and genuine with them. I give them space in which to unfold and, potentially, grow, in their way of being while receiving the gift that is the witnessing of that unfolding.

This is simple and difficult all at once as every conversation ebbs and flows to inform our overall pattern of relating. There occurs between us an evolving exchange of meanings and potentialities as we live forward from moment-to-moment the totality of who we are and have ever been. I am not particularly spiritual about all of this and yet there is a sense of

[2] Carl Rogers (1995, p. 202). See Ellingham (2009), Mearns and Cooper (2017), and Tierney (2018) on what has been variously coined mutuality and relational depth (and see Cornelius-White et al. [2018], Di Malta et al. [2024], and Wiggins et al. [2012] for related research).

something sacred within that connection, to me. We are "in session" or "meeting for therapy"; I am "working with a client" or "running a group" or "maintaining a caseload. . . ." And yet, under the language of the mental health field, it is much more: Opportunity to share moments of mutual understanding with another person, about a fundamental aspect of their experience of the world.

While there are many blocks to empathic attunement and some things are obviously unacceptable due to illegality or the possibility of harm to self or others, I do not generally constrain the sharing of the person with whom I am meeting in counseling or therapy. Related to this is an idea of Fred Rogers's that has resonated with me: that of loving what you do in front of others. It seems a natural extension to invite the person I am with to share with me what they are passionate about if they wish to do so. The recognition, for instance, that autistic and ADHD-labeled persons enjoy discussing their interests (Leong & Graichen, 2024; Rosqvist et al., 2023) is central to my neuroaffirming practice. Empowering people to explore what it means to be themselves includes their hobbies and interests. Therapy does not only focus on problems.

There is no Connection without Curiosity

In counseling and therapy, we journey alongside many people, some of whom are at their lowest or questioning much about their lives. Within every encounter we walk alone and together to establish anew the necessary contact with which to meet and adequately hear the person we are with at the moment (Mearns & Schmid, 2006), whom Fred Rogers would have considered his "neighbor" (in what he considered "a parable for the desire of closeness;" Seback, 1987). We venture forth, holding the spiraling therapeutic frame–every step taking us into potentially fraught, uncharted territory. And yet there is a surety to this process, a sense that even as we are traversing a gravelly, unpaved path, some certainty might emerge from the murk for the people with whom we meet. As we walk alongside them, they *can be trusted* to move towards growth.

It is important to remember that the therapeutic relationship is not inherently special (Rogers, 1957). Separately from therapy, we can bring our curiosity into everyday life and hold space for whoever we are with, as Fred Rogers demonstrated repeatedly (Allison, 2019; Breznican, 2017; Hutson, 2024; Junod, 2019; Madigan, 2012, 2022; Usher, 2018).

This has perhaps long been assumed, but as a corollary on Carl Rogers's theory of therapeutic change (1957), I see curiosity for a person's experiences as an essential precondition to psychological contact and interpersonal connection. Whether discussing the material aspects and surface-level problems of a person's day or deeper concerns they may hold inside, I carefully listen for what is essential to who and what the person is amidst their daily experiences: the unasked questions; the fears and passions; the yearning for connection; moments of joy and vulnerability and sorrow; the things about them that others diminish, pathologize, or pay little if any attention; the search for self-understanding; and so much more.

I am curious to know not just what and how the person I am with is thinking but how they are feeling. I want to know how they are experiencing me and the space I give them, in which they have the freedom to be, or not to be, and explore most any way they wish. What they bring to the moment, what they *are* in the moment, is met with the freedom to be and unfold as it is (Butler, 2021a, 2021b). What pressing matter do they need to discuss *right now*? What might they fear reporting aloud yet feel a deep yearning to release? What do they wish they could say to other people, or what might they want others to know about them, that they fear sharing? What are their regrets; their desires for their lives? What do they feel is too mundane or boring to share which, upon being shared, would light their soul on fire to be able to relay to another person? These and many others are the things I want to hear and for which I wish to hold space.

These are some of the things which are essential to my way of being.

> To walk a labyrinth is to step into an opening, follow a path to the center, and wind your way out again. In the walking, especially when you walk it again and again, the spiral begins to walk you. It holds you so you might loosen and lift into a deeper experience of yourself as everything. (Butler, 2024)

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Ethics and Psychotherapy: A Prolegomenon to Client-Centered Therapy Without Client-Centered Theory

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> *How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher.*
> *—Wittgenstein*

My justification for practicing client-centered therapy (CCT) rests on a consistency between certain of my values and the practice Rogers advocates, not on a belief in his theory of personality or his conception of the process of psychotherapeutic change nor on the empirical evidence for the efficacy of the practice. This essay is a brief preliminary attempt at showing this consistency. I begin with an argument for the necessity of an ethical justification of any psychotherapeutic practice, then describe the principle of self-determination on which I base my practice, and, finally, sketch a justification of CCT based on this principle.

Having abandoned any notions of THE way that the world is or of THE nature of man and substituted for them the belief that there are many viable versions of the world and many grounds for constructing viable versions, I am not tempted to justify my therapeutic practice in the way I believe most therapists do: by basing it on believed-to-be-true versions of human nature and of "sickness" and "health." Consumers of psychological theories tend to read theoretical elaborations of these concepts as if they self-evidently contain directives for practice. They look to the theory for guidance on how to "help" clients and so fail to explicitly address the moral question of what one should do if the theory is true. A client-centered therapist, for example, may provide the conditions Rogers describes on the belief that doing so is necessary for clients' growth without considering if the goal and the means to it are morally good. Even if Rogers is right about the nature of human beings, it does not necessarily follow that one should practice therapy as he does.

Even when all the facts are in and woven elegantly together with a theory, one's responsibility for making choices cannot devolve to the theory.

Theories, as representations of states of affairs and their interrelationships, just are not "equipped" to assume this responsibility. Theories offer therapists an account of the client (of personality, problems, interpersonal style, etc.) of "optimal functioning," "health," and of the likely consequences of certain actions on the client, but they cannot dictate which actions therapists should perform. Similarly, an expert auto mechanic faced with a case of fouled plugs may know that replacing the plugs and tuning the engine will restore the car to "optimal functioning," but this knowledge (theory) does not, and cannot, prescribe doing this rather than junking the car, putting it in a museum, replacing the entire engine, or installing a new ignition system. With or without a theory in hand one makes such choices on the basis of values (personal preferences, aesthetic criteria, moralities).

If one's choices can affect other persons, as they must in therapy, one has entered the moral or ethical realm and is in a position to do good, or bad, or neither relative to some conception of these. So even if, as a therapist, one doesn't eschew psychological theory in favor of a sort of ontological relativism, one still acts in the moral realm. Theory then serves as a (partial) delineation of the world within which one makes choices, raises and resolves ethical questions, or maintains an ethical stance while believing that one's practice is dictated by the theory. If the ethical questions are consciously considered, one's answers to them, and only indirectly one's theory, become the essential basis for practice. A client-centered therapist who has come to terms with the ethical nature of psychotherapy provides the conditions, not because of a belief in the veracity of a causal connection between the conditions and growth, but because of a belief that providing the conditions is morally good.

The Right to Self-Determination

> *. . . the lives of men in general will not improve until every single man strives to live well himself and not interfere in the lives of others! —Tolstoy*

> *Liberty consists of giving each individual the right to liberate himself, each according to his personal needs. — Ibsen*

Good and bad, right and wrong are not absolutes. Nor are they self-evident or capable of irrefutable justification. One chooses them, wittingly or unwittingly. My good as a therapist is the traditional right to freedom or self-determination. The right to self-determination is the "liberty to do anything which does not coerce, restrain, or injure another person" (Benn, 1967, p. 196). In my view, this right is neither natural nor inalienable. Rather, it defines a mode of relating to others: One believes that one is free to determine one's way in the world, that others have the right to do likewise, and one acts on the basis of that belief, making no attempt to limit their freedom. The right has no "existence" beyond being granted or claimed. The alternative to respecting this right is a more or less subtle degradation of those to whom it is denied—they are treated as less than human, or more accurately, as less than oneself. "For if one denied a man this right, it would be open to others to use him, like their beasts and their tools, for their own purposes and as they chose . . . " (Benn, 1967, p. 197).

The ramifications of this right are manifold; among them are important questions about the range of the right and one's responsibilities to oneself and others in special circumstances. Here I can but outline an approach to these questions. Exercise of the right is always constrained: we are bound by the physical world (e.g. , things, our bodies), by others (e.g. , the rights of others, tyrants), and by ourselves (e.g. , fear, apathy). In many instances restriction of the right does not deserve special attention. The point in each domain (the physical, political, and personal) at which special consideration may be necessary can be defined by reference to the notion of a voice. Exercise of the right can be conceived as speaking for oneself, as voicing one's preferences and ideas, through speech and action, as one makes one's way in the world.

Physical limitations Self-determination as defined here is a right which "exists" in relationships between individuals, not a capacity or process within an individual. The absence of a capacity for exercising the right is defined as the absence of a voice. When one cannot speak for oneself, one cannot exercise one's right. Exactly who lacks a voice cannot be specified

in advance. The notion of a voice is interdependent on the notions of listening, observing, and understanding: whether or not someone can speak depends on whether or not one is trying to pay attention and to understand.

Through empathy, sensitivity, imagination, and intuition one can understand even those who cannot literally speak. Lipa, a young peasant in Chekov's story "In the Ravine," illustrates this. As she plays with her child she says: "Who is he? What is he like? As light as a little feather, as a little crumb, but I love him; I love him like a real person. Here he can do nothing, he can't talk, and yet I know what he wants with his little eyes" (Chekov, 1918, p. 216).

Political constraint In a community in which all of the members respect each other's rights, the limits of the members' rights undergo frequent negotiation and renegotiation. When the right is denied or constrained one is faced with a choice between resistance and acquiescence, or between revolutionary activity and going about one's business. These are difficult choices, and I can say no more about them here.

Personal constraint (**self-constraint**) Individuals who repudiate their right to self-determination can speak, but choose not to do so. Their silence, then, is an exercise of their right: their speech, while not literal, is actual. I cannot think of examples of persons in this category, and, in any case, they are treated like anyone else with the capacity for speech.

The Right to Self-Determination and Client-Centered Therapy

Any form of therapy is consistent with the right to self-determination if it is based on a contract a client freely makes with a therapist to receive certain services. A client may contract to have his complexes analyzed or his behavior modified or may agree to place himself entirely in his therapist's hands: The client expresses a preference or want, and the therapist agrees to honor it. CCT differs from this sort of contractual relationship in that it is based on respecting a client's right to self-determination throughout the course of the relationship. The therapist's attitudes of empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard create a sort of empty space in which the client has maximum freedom to exercise the right in the relationship. The benefit of CCT consists in just this. The therapist does not attempt to promote self-acceptance, self-

direction, positive growth, self-actualization, congruence between real or perceived selves, a particular version of reality, or anything, but simply acts to provide maximum opportunity for exercise of the right to self-determination. While the therapist's behavior does influence or affect the client (there would be no point to therapy if it didn't) in a way the therapist believes will be beneficial or useful, the therapist does not intend to bring about any particular changes in the client. The benefits of CCT are byproducts of the therapist's behavior, not the aims of the behavior. In light of the literature documenting the sorts of changes that tend to occur in CCT, this may seem disingenuous. But as long as the therapist does not intend to bring about these changes, it is not. Purity of intent is everything.

The attitudes Rogers advocates are, I believe, deep forms of respect for the rights of others to determine their own way in life. The right to self-determination does not rest on an evolving capacity to make better choices or to become who one really is. It "exists" whenever it is respected or fought for. So if, as a therapist, I do not on my own initiative prescribe symptoms, give advice, or make interpretations, it is not because I believe I am interfering with some nascent process of self-actualization or anything like that. It is just that I am being fussy about people's right to choose for themselves. (And because I believe that such interventions are in general harmful and insulting. Much therapy consists of using people "for their own good.")

By basing the practice of psychotherapy entirely on the values and attitudes of the therapist and refusing to make assumptions about human nature or the needs of clients, I have given the practice a purely ethical basis with no admixture of theoretical or empirical considerations. But of course, the raison d'être of client-centered therapy is not to provide the therapist with an opportunity to exercise virtue but to provide some benefit to those who come to therapy—increased self-acceptance, self-determination (in the psychological sense), etc. The therapist offers help and takes responsibility for actually being of help, but does not intend to bring about specific changes. One cannot, however, sensibly take responsibility for an outcome one does not intend to cause and one cannot intend to cause specific changes without abrogating the client's right to self-determination. The therapist then can only create the space, the opportunity, for clients to exercise their right in ways they find beneficial. The therapist is responsible only for

maintaining the conditions and for monitoring whether or not they are of use; the client takes it, or doesn't, from there.

An adequate implementation of the attitudes has a probabilistic and indirect effect—in practice it is often beneficial. The criterion for determining the adequacy of the implementation of the attitudes is not the presence or absence of certain changes in the client. At least it should not be. To do so would make the practice wholly instrumental by tying particular actions of the therapist to particular changes in the client. The adequacy of implementation of the attitudes should be determined by what it means to empathically understand, to be congruent, to be accepting, and by the extent to which one is fully present with just these attitudes.

The claim to be of help rests on confidence in one's ability to provide the conditions and on faith that clients can make use of the opportunity for increased expression of the right in ways they find beneficial. The therapist's responsibility is only to the task of providing the conditions, not to the use the client makes of the conditions (immoral use excepted). To do otherwise is to constrain exercise of the right. The client-centered therapist practices on the basis of a belief that the right to self-determination is good, and that behavior consistent with it is good, and that behavior that provides an opportunity for maximum expression of the right is best: The practice of CCT consists essentially of being on one's best behavior.

It is just lucky that things work out like this, that acting in a respectful, accepting way without attempting to bring about any particular changes tends to be of benefit to others. It is just lucky because the therapist's practice is bound by a single overriding concept: the concept of a person, i.e. , of a being with the right to self-determination. One can do no more than act out of attitudes consistent with this concept without ceasing to make oneself of service to a client and instead treating symptoms, restructuring processes, or teaching new behaviors. The client can make beneficial use of someone who acts in a way that respects peoples' right to self-determination, and the therapist can offer himself or herself as someone who gives help, because, on the whole and in general, the therapist's actions have the consequence of someone making good use of them. The world just happens to be in such a way that one person can be of help to another just by respecting him or her as a person.

I have sketched an idealized version of CCT; in practice, it is more complex, and acting consistent with the right more problematic. This version is unlike the "standard" version in some ways. For example, clients' questions, once understood, are answered if the therapist is willing and able. One responds to a voice with a voice, not with a covert attempt to do the speaker some good. Some of this is described in Barbara Temaner's "Criteria for Making Empathic Responses in Client-Centered Therapy," where a somewhat different rationale is given.

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An Integrative Person-Centered Approach to Fostering Counseling Engagement by Honoring Client Preferences

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Abstract Active client engagement in counseling is essential for successful outcomes. We propose that the person-centered approach is an ideal foundation for integrative counseling and that from a person-centered foundation, counselors may implement strategies from other approaches to honor client preferences and increase client engagement. Our assertions are supported by research on the therapeutic relationship, self-determination theory, research on client preferences, the contextual model, and integrative person-centered theorists.

Keywords *person-centered, engagement, integration, counseling*

The person-centered approach (PCA) is grounded in the belief that people will develop in positive ways under the right conditions. Rogers (1957) identified conditions that are needed for positive change to occur in counseling; these conditions are often summarized as empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard, the core conditions. Tursi and Cochran (2006) argued that, although the PCA provides the most helpful therapeutic relationship, some clients may desire a fair amount of direction from their therapists and dropout of person-centered therapy if their preferences are not met. They suggested that counselors may implement strategies from various approaches while upholding person-centered values. In other words, counselors could have a strong person-centered foundation and also integrate strategies from other theories. If clients are offered interventions that resonate with them, and they feel heard and understood, the chance of therapeutic engagement increases.

We propose that the PCA is an ideal foundation for counseling integration and that person-centered counselors can increase the chances of client engagement by integrating strategies from other counseling approaches when clients desire these strategies. Our assertions are supported by (a) literature focused on therapeutic relationship variables (Miller & Rollnick, 2013), (b) self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), (c) research on client preferences in counseling (Norcross & Cooper, 2021), (d) the contextual model (Wampold & Imel, 2015), and (e) integrative person-centered theorists (e.g., Cain, 2013; Cooper & McLeod, 2011a; Tausch, 1990; Worsley, 2004).

Client Engagement

Client participation, or engagement, is the primary determinant of success in counseling (Bohart & Tallman, 1999; Constantino et al., 2010; Orlinsky et al., 1994). Engagement has been defined as "all the efforts that clients make during the course of treatment (both within and between sessions) toward the achievement of changes (treatment outcomes)" (Holdsworth et al., 2014, p. 430). Some authors equate engagement with the therapeutic relationship (Holdsworth et al., 2014) or alliance (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). We view the therapeutic relationship and engagement as overlapping, but distinct, concepts and believe that, in addition to focusing on fostering a therapeutic relationship, counselors should specifically attend to their clients' engagement. Despite the importance of client engagement, the concept has been inadequately addressed (Holdsworth et al., 2014).

The Therapeutic Relationship

From the person-centered perspective, engagement is encouraged by a therapeutic relationship (Bohart & Tallman, 1999; Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Rogers, 1959, 1961). When clients experience their counselors as empathic, congruent, and non-judgmental, they become more expressive of feelings and open to internal experiences (Rogers,1959). Empathy and unconditional positive regard from counselors encourage client exploration and willingness to connect with difficult feelings (Cochran & Cochran, 2021). The connection between the therapeutic relationship and engagement is bidirectional. The therapeutic relationship encourages engagement and client engagement provides a vehicle from

which the relationship can develop (Tursi et al., 2022). The therapeutic, or working, alliance is an important component of the overall therapeutic relationship. Bordin (1979) described the working alliance as agreement, between the client and counselor, on the tasks and goals of counseling, and a bond that allows clients to explore protected aspects of experience.

Motivation and Engagement: Self-Determination Theory

Client engagement is in large part a manifestation of their motivation (Lynch, 2014; Miller and Rollnick, 2013). Motivation impacts clients' engagement even when a therapeutic alliance has been established (Ryan et al., 2011). According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017), motivation is supported by the satisfaction of three psychological needs: autonomy, or acting in accordance with one's own desires, as opposed to feeling controlled or pushed to act; relatedness, or a sense of belonging, connection to others; and competence, or the belief that one is effective at accomplishing important tasks. From the perspective of SDT, autonomy is related to the type of motivation one experiences; one may be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. When individuals are intrinsically motivated, they engage in an activity for the enjoyment of that activity. This is the most autonomous motivation. When an individual is extrinsically motivated, they engage in an activity to receive some outcome that is separate from the activity itself, e.g., a reward. However, people may feel autonomous in situations in which they do not feel intrinsic motivation if they do not feel controlled. For example, a person may exercise regularly, despite not enjoying it, because they value a healthy lifestyle and recognize the benefits of exercise; their motivation would be autonomous. If one exercised because of pressure from a spouse, motivation would not be autonomous (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Teixeira et al., 2012).

When clients feel autonomous motivation for counseling, they are more likely to continue, have greater benefits, and maintain progress (Lynch, 2014; Lynch et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Counselors support client autonomy in many ways including by being empathic and non-judgmental, providing rationales for the approaches they use, respecting resistance, facilitating awareness and supporting clients to make choices, and avoiding controlling pressure and incentives (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Research on SDT and counseling has focused more on autonomy than relatedness and competence. However, the three psychological needs impact each other. Lynch (2013) found that people in relationships were more likely to seek emotional support when feeling secure attachment and autonomy support. Autonomy support fosters all three psychological needs and, in counseling, fosters client engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2008).

Honoring Client Preferences

Sheldon et al (2003) highlighted the importance of autonomy supportive counseling relationships that include honoring clients' perspectives and offering choices of counseling approach. Being responsive to client preferences fosters autonomy. Respecting clients' opinions and desires will have a positive impact on the therapeutic relationship (Norcross & Cooper, 2021).

Several factors may impact clients' desires for different counselor interventions. For example, a client's culture may impact their expectations of counseling, including preferences for the amount of direction from counselors (Sue et al., 2022). Norcross and Cooper (2021) stated that counselors should beware of the tendency to think that clients prefer what they (counselors) prefer. In a study comparing the counseling preferences of laypersons and mental health professionals, Cooper et al. (2019) found that laypersons preferred directiveness in counseling more than the professionals. They also preferred less emotional intensity than the professionals.

Assessing and honoring clients' preferences for counseling approaches appears to be an effective way to enhance the therapeutic alliance (Windle et al., 2020) and improve engagement (Norcross & Cooper, 2021). Client drop-out is a common form of disengagement. Swift and Greenberg (2015) argued that reducing drop-outs has the most potential of any tactic for improving counseling outcomes. In a meta-analytic review of client preferences, Swift et al. (2019) found that clients who were not provided their preferred approach dropped out almost twice as often as those whose preferences were met. The effect on outcome was small but meaningful. Fortunately, merely talking about preferences reduces drop-out (Norcross & Cooper, 2021).

Norcross and Cooper (2021) recommended accommodating client preferences to personalize counseling to each client. They stated that counselors should be particularly responsive to strong client

preferences; focusing on minor preferences may be unnecessary and counterproductive. The authors identified several ways to elicit preferences, such as asking clients what they believe might be helpful, asking about previous counseling, and exploring what they liked and did not like as well as suggesting alternative approaches. They also stated that, when exploring preferences, counselors must not come across as if they do not know how to help, but, rather, that they are interested in their clients' opinions and respect their preferences. Norcross and Cooper advised counselors to continue exploring preferences as counseling progresses. Counselors should check in with clients to determine if their needs are being met and the alliance is intact; we cannot assume that clients will express dissatisfaction. Counselors should work to be mindful of alliance ruptures and take steps to repair ruptures when they occur. In addition to responding to signs of alliance ruptures in sessions (Teyber & McClure, 2011), counselors may use instruments such as the Cooper-Norcross Inventory of Preferences (Norcross and Cooper, 2021) for a detailed account of client preferences and the Session Rating Scale (Duncan et. al., 2003) to assess how clients feel about the counseling they are receiving.

Lynch (2014) stated that competence is supported when clients feel like their actions will have positive results. When choosing a counseling strategy, clients will undoubtedly choose what they believe will be most helpful. Respecting client choice is consistent with the PCA. Norcross and Cooper (2021) identified several possible reasons that clients may benefit from and be more satisfied when their preferences are accommodated. First, clients may know what they like and what helps them (McLeod, 2012). Second, having choice increases positive affect and increases motivation. Third, client choice may improve the therapeutic alliance; assessing and accommodating preferences may foster agreement on goals and tasks. Therefore, matching client preferences should not be viewed as independent of the therapeutic relationship.

Counseling Integration

The push to integrate different counseling approaches has been active for decades. The premise of the movement is that integrating more than one approach can lead to more effective counseling (Norcross &

Alexander, 2019). Goldfried (1991) stated that the purpose of studying "integration is to . . . enhance our effectiveness in dealing with different types of clinical problems" (p. 21). Integration was a reaction to the perceived limitations of distinct counseling models (Goldfried. 1991; Norcross & Alexander, 2019).

The Medical Model

Integrating to focus on specific problems is consistent with the movement to empirically support counseling interventions (e.g., identifying counseling approaches that successfully treat specific diagnoses). This approach is grounded in a medical model of counseling that is predicated on the belief that counseling is effective because of specific ingredients that remedy specific problems, such as changing symptom producing thoughts with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT; Wampold & Imel, 2015). Theorists have advocated for empirically supported integrative approaches that are similar to empirically supported pure form treatments (Shoham & Rohrbaugh, 1996).

The medical model in the context of counseling has been challenged. Research shows that factors other than matching treatments to problems have a greater impact on clients' outcome (Norcross & Lambert, 2019b; Wampold & Imel, 2015). The therapeutic relationship, facilitated by the therapist's empathy, congruence, and positive regard, has a considerable impact on client outcome and is, in fact, likely more important that the treatment approach (Norcross & Lambert, 2019b). A component of the overall relationship, the therapeutic alliance, is strongly correlated with counseling outcome (Flückiger et al., 2019; Norcross & Lambert, 2019b).

The Contextual Model

The contextual model (Wampold and Imel, 2015) is an alternative to the medical model in counseling. According to the contextual model, positive counseling outcome is achieved through three pathways: (a) a real relationship between the client and counselor (Gelso, 2014), (b) client expectations that the approach will be helpful, and (c) client engagement in the tasks of counseling (specific ingredients). Specific ingredients are not viewed as remedies of a deficit, but, rather, lead clients to engage in healthy activities. Changes made by engaging in healthy actions will lead to overall improvements in clients' lives. Specific ingredients do not need to be matched to problems.

Lynch (2014) suggested that motivation is at the core of the contextual model (Wampold & Budge, 2012). According to the model, as clients begin, they must have a desire for counseling, or autonomous motivation. Furthermore, each of the three pathways to change may be understood through SDT's basic psychological needs. Pathway one, the real relationship, satisfies the need for relatedness. Pathway two, the creation of expectations, may lead to a greater sense of competence; clients believe that the actions they take in counseling will result in a positive outcome. Finally, pathway three is underway after clients engage in health promoting behavior. Lynch stated that this pathway should be facilitated in an autonomy supporting way, e.g., goals and tasks are developed collaboratively.

Integration to Honor Client Preferences and Foster Engagement

Given the facts that (a) abundant research challenges the medical model (Norcross & Lambert, 2019a; Wampold & Imel, 2015) and (b) client involvement, or engagement, in counseling is essential (Bohart & Tallman, 1999; Constantino et al., 2010; Orlinsky et al., 1994), we suggest that, rather than integrating to target client problems or syndromes, counselors should integrate to increase the chances of client engagement, thereby increasing the chances of client satisfaction. A primary way to accomplish this is to integrate clients' preferred strategies into the therapeutic relationship, thereby honoring client preferences and respecting client autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and individuality (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2018; Norcross & Cooper, 2021).

Integration in the Person-Centered Tradition

Rogers's (1957) argument for the sufficiency of his identified counseling conditions may lead many to believe that integration is antithetical to the PCA. However, in a 1975 interview, he stated that client-centered counselors "can utilize many modes from other points of view and yet keep a basically person-centered philosophy" (Francis, 2009, p. 16). Other theorists have proposed integrative person-centered models. A consistent theme of integrative person-centered theorists is a recognition that different clients may desire different things. In other words, they recommended integrating to respond to client preferences

Cain (2013) maintained that clients know what is best for them and that person-centered counseling should be collaborative. He stated that implementing strategies from other approaches may help person-centered counselors increase their effectiveness with clients who do not respond optimally to the person-centered approach. When providing Cain's (2010, 2013) "collaborative-pragmatic-adaptive approach, the therapist and client individualize each therapy by being partners in the definition and understanding of the client's problems, desired goals and means to achieve those goals, and the identification and development of an optimal therapeutic relationship" (Cain, 2013, p. 255).

Tausch (1990) suggested implementing strategies from other approaches into the PCA at times, such as when counseling is not progressing, and that clients may want particular types of interventions. Cohen (1994) argued that counselors may implement techniques from other approaches and maintain a person-centered stance if clients want to explore other techniques from another approach. Integration can demonstrate respect for the client's desire and trust in client self-direction. Brodley and Brody (2011) stated that techniques implemented with specific goals in mind can be part of the PCA if they are used because of requests or questions from clients and not from counselors' assessment. The authors recognized that person-centered counselors may have knowledge of other approaches and may use techniques from these approaches that can be applied, occasionally, when requested by clients. Brodley and Brody stated that, in these cases, the strategy should be viewed as an experiment to serve the client who is in control and decides if the technique is helpful. Brodley (2011) outlined issues that counselors should consider when responding to questions from clients including asking themselves if they are respecting client autonomy and self-direction and providing empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence. Worsley (2004) supports a thoughtful process to integration into the PCA, indicating that practitioners should question what to integrate and be open to test the effects.

In an exploration of his evolution as a counselor, Bohart (2015) highlighted the importance of a safe counseling relationship and suggested that counselors can offer suggestions for interventions. From the security of the relationship, interventions can "provide fodder for the active generative intelligent creative process of the client" (p. 1066). Offering techniques may be an example of sensitive responding. Bohart

stated that he is comfortable offering techniques from a variety of approaches and that he views this as sharing as opposed to intervening. Techniques, while being inherently helpful to some degree, may also make clients feel understood. Techniques are secondary to the relationship.

The pluralistic approach (Cooper & McLeod, 2011b) accounts for client preferences and was founded on the belief that many different counseling strategies can be effective. Pluralistic counselors explore what clients think will be helpful. It is not an integration of approaches, per se, but a framework and an attitude. It offers a foundation for an integrative practice that encourages a collaborative therapeutic relationship and honors client preferences. Different counseling approaches are not viewed as contradictory but rather complementary. Cooper & McLeod (2011a) developed a pluralistic person-centered approach founded on these principles.

Assimilative Integration

The term assimilative integration refers to the practice of primarily providing one approach while integrating strategies from other approaches (Messer, 1992, 2001). Norcross and Alexander (2019) identified advantages of assimilative integration. It enables counselors to respond to clients more flexibly than one approach allows. Assimilative integration may increase the effectiveness of counseling because it allows a practitioner to practice an approach that is generally effective and to make adjustments when issues such as client preferences, symptoms, history, or culture arise. Assimilative integration aligns with the natural tendency of counselors to expand their strategies over time.

Lampropoulos (2001) argued that assimilation should be used to apply validated strategies for specific problems. We believe that, rather than assimilating to target specific problems, strategies should primarily be assimilated into counseling relationships to respect client preferences and enhance engagement. Assimilative integration offers counselors a way to effectively match counseling strategies to client preferences while maintaining the values inherent in person-centered counseling.

Assimilating into the PCA

Many of the integrative strategies identified above may be considered assimilative (Bohart, 2015; Cain, 2013; Francis, 2009; Holdstock and Rogers, 1983; Tausch, 1990; Worsley, 2004). The PCA remains the approach. Strategies from other approaches supplement the work done within the person-centered relationship. We suggest that assimilating strategies into person-centered counseling to match client preferences will increase clients' engagement while they still reap the benefits of the PCA.

Tursi and Cochran (2006) developed an assimilative integrative model called the person-centered relational framework (PCRF) that is consistent with the integrative models described above. The PCRF, as it was originally conceived, is an example of an integration of the PCA and strategies from an approach well outside of the PCA: CBT. The authors argued that the principles of the PCA and CBT converge and that cognitive-behavioral tasks naturally occur in person-centered relationships. Moreover, knowledge of cognitive-behavioral principles may influence person-centered counselors' work. It may increase empathic understanding, an idea presented by Truax and Carkhuff (1967). For example, understanding the connection between thoughts and feelings may help counselors recognize client thought processes that are contributing to feelings, e.g., anxiety. This is consistent with Worsley (2004), who stated that he, as a person-centered counselor, looks to other models for insight and knowledge.

When working in the PCRF, CBT strategies may be implemented into a person-centered relationship when clients want to learn skills or desire more direction from their counselors. From the authors' perspectives, a primary reason to integrate is to honor clients' preferences. Clients may not tolerate what they see as a less directive process in person-centered relationships and terminate counseling prematurely. We believe that adding direction or skills when clients want them would enhance client engagement. Ramsay (2001) suggested that assimilative integration may provide solutions to impasses in counseling and that clients should be involved when deciding what is assimilated into the counseling relationship. Within the PCRF, a collaborative relationship is maintained. Strategies are offered as suggestions.

When integrating in the PCRF, counselors hold to person-centered ideals. For example, they prefer to help clients learn to identify and

dispute their own unhelpful thoughts rather than dispute them themselves, e.g., teaching Ellis's ABC concept and providing homework (Ellis, 1977). Worsley (2004) advised person-centered counselors to be careful about challenging clients' thoughts. This is consistent with Messer's (2001) belief that assimilated interventions take on new meaning from the therapeutic school of thought in which they are applied. When operating from the PCRF, counselors convey an understanding of clients' preferences and respect these preferences by offering suggestions. They remain congruent by offering something that makes sense from their (the counselor's) perspective and maintain unconditional positive regard by offering the strategy as a suggestion.

Even though the PCRF was originally conceived as an assimilative integration of the PCA and CBT, strategies from many approaches may be used as long as they are implemented collaboratively within the person-centered framework. Several counseling interventions from other approaches align well with person-centered/humanistic principles such as those that help clients accept previously avoided experience (e.g., mindfulness [Kabat-Zinn, 2013], sensorimotor activities [Ogden & Fisher, 2015], eye movement desensitization and reprocessing [Shapiro, 2017], and interventions from acceptance and commitment therapy [ACT; Hayes et al, 2012]). When implementing strategies from other approaches, counselors do not operate in ways that differ dramatically from how they typically work. They are simply adding interventions into a person-centered relationship. However, the model does not preclude using other methods to a greater degree if that will be most accepted by and helpful to the client at the time. The key is to honor clients' preferences and operate in a way that will foster engagement.

Even though Cooper & McLeod (2011b) avoid aligning with any particular integrative approach, assimilative integration is consistent with pluralistic philosophy (Messer, 2001). The PCRF fits Cooper and McLeod's model. When operating from the PCRF, counselors are flexible and recognize that different strategies can be helpful. Similar to the recommendations of Cooper & McLeod (2011a, b) and Norcross and Cooper (2021), we recommend that counselors actively facilitate conversations about preferences at the beginning of counseling and as counseling progresses. Counselors can elicit preferences about several aspects of counseling, including but not limited to counseling approaches, whether or not they want homework or to learn skills, as

well as counselor directivity (Norcross & Cooper, 2021). We believe that it is important to inform clients about how we work, e.g., describing what may occur in person-centered counseling (i.e., role induction [Orne & Wender, 1968; Swift et al., 2023]) and that it may also be beneficial for counselors to inform clients of the different interventions they can provide. For example, a counselor with experience providing interventions from ACT (Hayes et al., 2012) and sensorimotor psychotherapy (Ogden & Fisher, 2015) can give clients brief descriptions of these approaches if clients are interested. They could inform them that they can bring strategies from these approaches into their work together.

Strengths of a Person-Centered Assimilative Integration

A person-centered assimilative integration has many strengths. Disengagement and drop-out occur in all counseling approaches. Respecting autonomy and honoring client preference reduces drop-out. The PCA is positioned to address drop-out because it is predicated on respect for client autonomy and the importance of the therapeutic relationship. The therapeutic relationship involves a deep understanding of clients that may include understanding their theories about their problems and what they believe might be helpful. Therefore the PCA is an optimal foundation for an integrative approach.

It may be difficult to train counselors in multiple approaches. This is especially true in disciplines where practitioners are licensed at the master's level and therefore have less time in training. It may be more feasible to introduce counselors to assimilative integration, a less daunting undertaking since the practice is grounded in one approach (Norcross & Finnerty, 2019). This framework may be more accepted by counselors than a framework in which they would be expected to learn and implement approaches that diverge dramatically from what they want to do (Lampropoulos, 2001). Counselors have preferences for the ways they work (Norcross & Cooper, 2021). Like clients, counselors need to "buy into" their approaches (Wampold & Imel, 2015). In this model, the counselor's preferred modality is primary. The primary work is person-centered.

Caveats to our General Argument

We believe that integrating strategies from different counseling approaches can help person-centered counselors effectively counsel many clients. Moreover, we have identified several theorists who support integration within person-centered counseling relationships. However, we recognize that a solid therapeutic relationship fosters engagement (Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Rogers, 1961); assimilating other techniques into one's approach is not always necessary.

Consistent with Norcross and Cooper (2021), we would not suggest that counselors should do whatever clients want them to do. Any intervention integrated into a counseling relationship, including when the integration is an attempt to honor client preferences and increase engagement, must be appropriate and health promoting (Norcross & Cooper, 2021; Wampold & Imel, 2015). The task is to find an approach that is health promoting while also being accepted by the client.

We do not believe that matching client preferences is the only way to foster positive expectations about counseling. Role induction, or preparing clients for counseling and offering guidance about how they may be able to engage, may be used (Orne & Wender, 1968; Swift et al., 2023). This process improves outcome and reduces drop-out (Swift et al., 2023). Providing an explanation/rationale to enhance expectations for one's approach is part of effective practice (Wampold & Imel, 2015). Counselors must also realize that not all clients have strong preferences, and some may not be able to identify preferences (Norcross & Cooper, 2021).

Conclusion

Client engagement in the counseling process is essential for successful outcomes. We propose that integrating other therapeutic approaches into person-centered counseling relationships to honor client preferences can help foster engagement. Our recommendations are supported by research literature on therapeutic relationships, self-determination theory, client preferences, and the contextual model. Researchers, theorists, and practitioners seek to find ways to help diverse clients who enter counseling for a variety of reasons. An assimilative integration with a person-centered base offers a way to

adjust the process to meet their needs while ensuring that a therapeutic relationship is maintained.

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Book review

How Do We Become the Person That We Are? Creating A Life, by Grace Harlow Klein. Published December 2023 (graceharlowklein.com/store/). Paper, 372 pp.

In a unique approach to her memoirs, Dr. Grace Harlow Klein shares the history of who she is. It is not a typical autobiography or memoir as the reader might anticipate when considering the author's life story. Reading through the lens of a person-centered approach, the relaxed storytelling and personalized style challenge the reader to reflect and understand who they are and how their experiences throughout their life have shaped the person they became. For the reader who is also a person-centered advocate, it accomplishes two things. It makes us aware of how our experiences have shaped our biases, positive or negative, and how those can affect our encounters with our clients and increase our understanding and appreciation of who they are because of their personal history. It reminds us how we can use that knowledge to help them adjust or understand who they have become, the person they are, and how best to approach healing and controling their lives. Even through her choice of chapter titles, she draws attention to the adventures and experiences of life: from the early, formative "My Family" to "Growth," "New Beginnings," "Empowerment and Loss," "Relationships, Travel, A Continuous Thread," and "My Ongoing Life—2023." Each chapter is a mini story or adventure reminding the reader that our experiences become the layers of who each person becomes.

Overall, it was a delightful read and unlike an academic-style tutorial on the person-centered approach. Her memoirs provide a unique approach to reminding the person-centered clinician of the importance of "peeling away the layers" to get to the heart of who each person is, and how their personal experiences have formed the person they are at the current moment in time or how their journey leads them to where they are. It also provides an excellent supplemental, "out-of-the-box" tool for this purpose, as well as an enjoyable departure from the more traditional autobiography or personal account of a person's life. As I finished this book , I found myself with a desire to read more of her writings.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Teet

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