On Becoming a Non-Directivity Non-Believer: The Holey Tale of the Jumper

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As a person-centred counsellor/therapist, I didn't really give much thought to the notion of non-directivity until late 2004, early 2005. I'd had the good fortune to receive my counsellor education from Professor C. H. 'Pat' Patterson who'd been trained by Rogers in Chicago in the mid-1940s. Pat used to go on a lot about the core conditions, but didn't say much about the therapist being non-directive, although it was very much implied. My main intellectual interests regarding the person-centred approach centred on how person-centred theory could be further advanced, not on elaborating upon its theoretical base, which was what I took discussion of non-directivity to be about.

But that was until late 2004, early 2005.

What captured my attention at that time was a heated exchange on a person-centred internet discussion list concerning the merits of the notion of non-directivity. I was dismayed and appalled at the insulting personal messages directed at a well-known member of the person-centred community for questioning the notion's worth. Further, when, at some point, the aggressive tone of these messages was itself questioned—that they hardly seemed any kind of expression of the core conditions—then the reply given was essentially 'if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen'. This actually is what the person in question did, i.e. they left the list. Personally I thought they should have stayed to fight their corner.

The whole interchange, though, more than aroused my interest and I began to read up on the notion of the person-centred therapist being non-directive. This led me to make similar questioning comments about non-directivity on the same list. While, by way of reply, I didn't merit the same level of hostile response as the departed member, I was challenged to 'grow up'—not a very grown up response, I thought.

Since those initial internet altercations I've continued to read about the notion of non-directivity and sought to deepen my understanding—for which purpose the PCCS book *On Embracing Non-Directivity* edited by Brian Levitt proved particularly enlightening.

As a result, despite certain heavyweight figures in the approach declaring that non-directivity constitutes a cornerstone of person-centred theory and practice, the view that I've come to hold is that the definition of non-directivity is too full of holes to bear the weight of person-centred theory's overarching superstructure. Far from giving the approach a solid theoretical foundation on which to base fruitful further development, the notion actually hinders and undermines such efforts. To me, the embrace of non-directivity is something of a bear hug. It was for good reason, in my view, that having initially labelled his form of therapy 'non-directive', Rogers subsequently stopped using the term and instead chose the name 'client-centred'.

To explain something of why I view the notion of non-directivity in such a poor light, and with little space at my disposal, I've chosen to discuss the apocryphal anecdote of the suicidal jumper as a means of illustrating certain key aspects of non-directivity's 'holey' nature.

Retold by Howard Kirschenbaum (2007) in his excellent biography of Rogers (pp. 131-2), the story of the suicidal jumper originally surfaced in the 1940s as a vehicle for making fun of Rogers' non-directive therapy. It tells of an apocryphal non-directive therapist who does nothing but reflect back statements made by a male client as he first thinks about killing himself and then subsequently does so by jumping out of the window of the therapist's high rise consulting room: 'You feel like killing yourself', 'You're going to open the window and jump out', 'You're jumping out', 'There you go'.

As Kirschenbaum informs, this story appears related to a real life incident involving Jessis Taft, the person who developed relationship therapy and of whom Brian Thorne writes: 'she and her colleague, Frederick Allen became a major influence in Rogers' professional life and it was their version of ideas and practices that gradually permeated Rogers' own thinking and clinical behaviour' (2003: 9).

Describing her therapeutic work with a young girl, Taft tells how she let the girl lean dangerously out of her consulting room window, despite the fact, says Taft, 'that my heart was in my mouth' (1933: 53). With regard to Taft's 'non-directive' behaviour, Rogers comments that 'Dr Taft was rightly reluctant to put a limit to this activity' and so 'made plain that the responsibility rested with the child' (1942: 104).

So far as the apocryphal tale of the suicidal jumper is concerned, when asked about it in the mid-1960s Rogers responded: 'I *know* the story. My answer, once and for all time, is that I would not have let him jump out of the window' (in Kirschenbaum, 2007: 132).

Now given that grabbing hold of someone and stopping them jump out of a window is, as I see it, a highly directive thing to do, both in terms of attitude and behaviour, how does one square this with person-centred practice if a cornerstone of such practice is being non-directive?

What of these 'hallowed' words of Rogers written in 1949?

> Is the therapist willing to give the client the full freedom as to outcomes? Is he genuinely willing for the client to organize and direct his life? Is he willing for him to choose goals that are social or antisocial, moral or immoral? If not, it seems doubtful that therapy will be a profound experience for the client. Even more difficult, is he willing for the client to choose regressing rather than mental health?...to choose death rather than life? To me it appears that only as the therapist is completely willing that any outcome, any direction may be chosen—only then does he realize the vital strength of the capacity and potentiality of the individual for constructive action. (quoted in Kirschenbaum, 2007: 159)

In relation to this statement by Rogers, are we to take it that his later comment about stopping the jumper jump indicates that he has reneged on his earlier commitment to the therapist being non-directive?

Not according to today's advocates of non-directivity, even though 'non-directiveness …may be expressed as a principle for functioning in accordance with the value of respect for another's right to self-determination' (Witty, in Levitt, 2005: 243); and even, though, too,

'the therapist's realization of the gestalt of the core conditions implied a non-directive attitude' (p. 238), i.e. that expression of the core conditions is always non-directive in nature.

We have, then, rather a puzzle: it is okay for the non-directive therapist to directively stop the jumper jumping—i.e. it is in tune with non-directive therapy practice—even though being a non-directive therapist entails a fundamental commitment to respecting the client's right to self-determination and that expression of the core conditions is always non-directive.

How, then, do advocates of non-directivity resolve this puzzle?

Well they do it in a quasi-postmodernist/social constructionist fashion: that relativistic approach to understanding the person which says that being brought up in different cultures, or being in different cultural settings, entails our having different selves in relation to the setting. Put more plausibly, Japanese selves are different from American selves; less plausibly, my eating my breakfast self is a different self from my taking a shower self.

What the non-directivists say (tautologically) is that it's okay for the therapist to stop the jumper jumping because the therapist is then not a therapist but an ordinary human being; qua therapist, expression of the core conditions (the business of the person-centred therapist) is always non-directive, but qua ordinary human being the therapist may act in an ordinary human way and stop the jumper jumping. As soon as the non-directive therapist acts directively in this fashion they cease to be a non-directive therapist but become an ordinary human being.

So we see, then, that similar to social constructionists, the non-directivists seem to posit that the non-directive therapist has a different self in the counselling consulting room to the self they have out in the world of everyday human interaction; something that for me would fit with expressing the core conditions to clients but not to colleagues on an internet discussion list; something also for me that doesn't fit with Rogers' late emphasis on the person-centred approach being the expression of 'a way of being', as against multiple ways of being.

But back to non-directively stopping the jumper jump (and, for simplicity's sake, sticking with the key notion of unconditional positive regard, which for the non-directivist qua therapist is always expressed non-directively).

When the non-directive therapist qua ordinary human being directively stops the jumper jumping, when the mother directively stops her child running into the road, is this an expression of unconditional positive regard insofar as different rules of relating apply to ordinary human interactions compared with therapeutic ones? In which case in ordinary human interactions, directive behaviour and a directive attitude—where one person is deciding for another what is in their best interest—can be an expression of unconditional positive regard. The core conditions in such settings are thus not always non-directive in nature.

Or is it an expression of a lesser form of positive regard, i.e. conditional positive regard? In which case, the higher form of regard, unconditional positive regard, would appear to involve letting the jumper jump, the child run into the road. To be a non-directive therapist

thus means letting the jumper jump; to practise the lesser vocation of being an ordinary human being one would stop him.

As I say, to me, the notion of non-directivity is too holey, ties one up in too many knots, to act as a cornerstone of person-centred theory and practice. If you go back and examine Nat Raskin's definition of the non-directive attitude (taken by non-directivists as the quintessential definition of non-directivity—in Levitt, 2005) you find that Rogers (1951) was critical of it. Rogers went beyond Raskin's definition of the non-directive attitude to define the core conditions as a superior alternative, the expression of which may in everyday terms at times involve directive behaviour, even a directive attitude. The core conditions trump the non-directive attitude/non-directivity, which is not to say that in aiming as a person-centred therapist to express those conditions that being non-directive is not a useful rule of thumb.

References

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