Developing Perspectives and Themes in Person-Centred Theory

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<u>Introduction</u>

By the end of the 1950s, Carl Rogers had published the classical works laying down the fundamental theory and practice of person-centred therapy (Rogers, 1942, 1951, 1957, 1959), albeit that at that time he termed his therapy, 'client-centered', and it was not until the 1970s that he voiced his preference for the term 'person-centered' (Rogers, 1977: 5). Originally, Rogers had titled his therapeutic approach 'non-directive therapy', but this had resulted in its being misunderstood and reductively equated with the employment of 'reflection of feelings' as a robotic technique. To counter this emphasis upon technique and the overshadowing of the importance of the living presence and personal characteristics of the therapist, Rogers:

(a) introduced the title 'client-centered' to stress that the therapist's focus of attention was not upon a specific technique but upon the inner world of the client;

(b) defined in specific terms those personal characteristics and attitudinal attributes he considered required of therapists in order to facilitate 'therapeutic personality change': namely, empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence (Rogers, 1957).

Following identification and definition of these conditions, engagement in professional activities beyond the field of individual psychotherapy confirmed in Rogers the belief that these 'core' conditions and other central features of his

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theorising applied to persons in general, in whatever setting; hence his decision 'to adopt as broad a term as possible: person-centred' (Rogers, 1977: 5).

To identify themes that have developed in person-centred theory post-Rogers, we see it necessary to take a step back for a moment from considering person-centred theory as such.

It is our contention that the overriding perspective by which to make sense of developments in the PCA is on the basis of Kuhn's (1970) notions of a *paradigm* and a *paradigm shift.* Kuhn proposed that major developments in scientific understanding took place in terms of paradigm shifts: conceptual Gestalt switches with respect to the underlying theoretical framework of ideas by which the members of a particular scientific community defined their science's subject matter and by which they identified the methods appropriate for its practice. The scientific paradigm shift that had occurred in the twentieth century involved a move away from the Newtonian paradigm wherein ultimately existing entities (atoms, molecules etc.) were construed as individually isolated, enduring 'bits' of material, and a switch to a theoretical perspective in which what ultimately exists is thought of in process-relational terms; that is to say, in terms of the interrelatedness of patterns of activity. Rather than viewing the 'things' that exist as akin to billiard balls that bash against one another, the process-relational paradigm compared them to whirlpools in a stream, not only composed of patterned activity in themselves and embedded within an overarching field of activity, but also capable of merging with one another to form a greater, previously unimagined and newly created whole.

Living in California during his final years and having personal contact with internationally renowned natural scientists, Rogers became well acquainted with the

idea of a paradigm shift having occurred in the physical sciences. He became aware, too, that this shift had had repercussions in the realm of the social sciences, including psychology. Thanks to this 'enlightenment' led Rogers to express views highly critical of mainstream psychology.

Specifically, according to Rogers, mainstream psychology had remained 'determinedly tied' to the Newtonian paradigm; failing to take account of the change in worldview that had been occurring in 'theoretical physics and in various other 'hard' sciences as well as 'soft' sciences' (1980, p. 237). Indeed, as Rogers saw things, there was 'a great deal of evidence to indicate that in many aspects of our culture, including science, we are moving toward a process conception of all aspects of living and life' (1968/1990, p. 268). If we 'dare' to develop 'a human science', or 'true *psychological* science', Rogers thus indicated that the path ahead involves the superseding of the Newtonian worldview and the adoption of a process-relational paradigmatic mind-set.

We believe that by thinking in terms of these two paradigms and of a paradigm shift taking place between the two that we can best make sense of both Rogers' own later thinking and the thinking of those theorists and practitioners who have sought to carry forward his ideas.

Some individuals have attempted to further extrapolate upon the quasi-Newtonian strand of Rogers' theorising dominant in his 1950s theory statements. But a greater number of others have elaborated upon ideas and practices on the basis of a process-relational world-view. We believe the latter strand will prove the most 'fruitful and productive in the scientific sense' (Rogers, 1968, p. 65). In considering the perspectives and themes intrinsic to the further development of person-centred

theory post-Rogers, our focus will thus on those that accord with a process-relational mind-set. Broadly speaking we see these process-relational developments as falling within two general categories that have their origin in Rogers' late theorising:

A. Developments under the heading of what the Germans term *Geisteswissenschaft,* i.e., attempts to formulate knowledge within the domain of human culture and the humanities;

B. Developments associated with *Naturwissenschaft*, the natural sciences.

A. Geisteswissenschaft – humanities theorising

(1) Rogers' final theorising

In Rogers' final theorising, so far as *Geisteswissenschaft* is concerned, we find (a) a 'Buberian' existential/encounter emphasis and (b) a social constructionist/postmodern one.

(a) A primary influence on the existential/encounter aspects of Rogers' theorising is the ' I-Thou' philosophy of Martin Buber. The essence of this philosophy, according to person-centred author, Richard Worsley, is that

> '[W]e come into being as individuals by being first of all in relation to others.
> The 'saying' of I-Thou can be a silent attitude, not necessarily a literal
> speaking. This attitude defines our being. We exist, because always we may
> meet the other as Thou' (2008: 186).

'I:Thou', extrapolates Worsley, is the fully immersed encounter with the Other. The relationship of I:It, when the other is an object rather than encounter, is no less legitimate. At the same time '[T]o reside in I-It is to be less than present with my

whole being' (ibid.: 187). A devotee of Hasidic Judaism, Buber's thought is inextricably tied to his faith in God. He has been described as an exponent of 'inclusive mysticism' (Ellingham, 2009) since 'the Thou of I-Thou knowing is not limited to men [and women] but may include animals, trees, objects of nature' (Friedman, 2002: 65), to 'an animal, a plant, a stone' (Buber, 1961: 27). 'Spirit, describes Buber, 'is not in the *I,* but between *I* and *Thou*. It is not like the blood that circulates in you, but like the air in which you breathe' (Buber, 1958: 39).

Rogers, albeit an avowed agnostic, uses the term 'I-Thou' to describe the 'mystical/spiritual' moments in the counselling relationship when the therapist and the client are so in tune and at one that it felt as if the inner spirit of the one had reached out and touched 'the inner spirit of the other' (Rogers, 1980: 129). At such moments of mutual encounter, asserted Rogers, 'profound growth and healing and energy are present'.

(b) The social constructionist/postmodern thread to Rogers' theorising links with the relativism intrinsic to Kuhn's formulations wherein what counts as scientific knowledge or 'true' reality is a relative matter corresponding with what a particular community of scientists deems it to be. Contemporary postmodernist social constructionists consider this to be 'true' for different cultures in general.

Certainly we can say that up to a point Rogers is in tune with this social constructionist/postmodern viewpoint. He for instance acknowledges that 'from time immemorial, the tribe or the community or the nation or the culture has agreed upon what constitutes the real world' (p. 1980: 102). And at odds with earlier assertions underpinning his 'scientific' theorising—that 'truth is unitary' and that 'there may be such a thing as objective truth' (1959:191-192)—Rogers formulate us with the

following loaded questions: '(C)an we today afford the luxury of having 'a reality'? Can we still preserve the belief that there is a 'real world' upon whose definition we all agree?' (1980: 104). To which his personal response is: 'I am convinced that this is a luxury we *cannot* afford, a myth we dare not maintain?' (ibid.) (italics in original).

People's experience of altered states of consciousness Rogers sees as additional evidence of our ability to 'live in different realities' and further support ing his view that 'men and women, individually and collectively, are inwardly and organismically rejecting the view of one single, culture approved reality' (pp. 107-106).

Statements such as these suggest Rogers was much in tune with social constructionist/postmodernist thinking, a conclusion reinforced by his 1977 publication *On personal power.* For postmodern social constructionists say people accept the view of reality espoused by their culture because it is imposed upon them by those in power, that it is a matter of politics. And in *On Personal Power* we find Rogers discussing politics and power relationships with respect to the domains of psychotherapy and mental health.

Another feature of such postmodernist thinking is that since who we are is deemed the result of social construction, we are said to have different selves apropos different cultural environments—a line of thought pursued by Mearns in his development of the person-centred construct of 'configurations of self' .

Rogers own social constructionist/postmodernist theorising, however, seems to involve a 'mix of concepts deriving from two… paradigms' (Ellingham, 2001: 96), as indicated by the following statement:

> The only reality I can possibly know is the world as *I* perceive and experience it at this moment. The only reality you can possibly know is the world as *you* perceive and experience 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: 102)

Thus, on the one hand Rogers indicates he have moved on from his 1959 assertion that 'truth is unitary'. But then again, even as he is positing the existence of many different 'real' worlds, at this same stage in his life he hypothesizes the real existence of a single holistic, 'formative tendency in our universe, evident at all levels', whose workings 'enable us to enjoy 'a transcendent awareness of the harmony and unity of the cosmic system, including humankind' (1980, pp. 134, 133). And, if this is not paradoxical enough, unlike the postmodernists he does not posit a pluralist self constructed by different environments/realities but rather a unitary, real 'atomic' self that indwells in and remains the same across 'different realities'.

(2) Post-Rogers theorising

Regarding the views of those thinkers mainly aligned with the humanities/Geisteswissenschaft strand of Rogers' theorising, table1 presents, a) what we are terming Buberian existential/encounter and b) social constructionist and postmodern developments. This shows a number of person-centred authors along with the ideas they have developed and/or mainly been associated with in the period following Rogers' death—some authors being associated with more than one set of ideas, as we to some extent explicate.

There is more than one form of the Buberian existential/encounter development of person-centred theory and practice. Two are perhaps most notable; the form

expounded by Schmid which we have named 'the encounter philosophy' form, and the form inspired by Mearns, in tandem respectively with Thorne and Cooper, which we are terming, using Mearns' title, the 'relational depth' form. As with many things in life, including person-centred theory, it is something of a simplification to have such a strong demarcation between the different strands of theorising and we have created such a stylised view for reasons of succinctness when also, as we have noted, a number are discussed in detail in other chapters.

B. Naturwissenschaft - the natural sciences theorising

(1) Rogers' final theorising

A primary source of the *Naturwissenschaft* strand present in Rogers' late process-relational thought is Rogers' paper 'The foundations of a person-centered approach' (1980). There Rogers links ideas taken from contemporary developments in the realm of the natural sciences with the notion of the 'fully-functioning individual', the term that Rogers had earlier employed to describe 'the person who would emerge if therapy were maximally successful', the person who, in his view, would be 'a fit vanguard of human evolution' (1967, pp. 183, 194).

Still earlier Rogers had posited that present in the human organism and life in general was an *actualizing tendency*, 'an inherent tendency of the organism to develop all its capacities in ways which serve to maintain and enhance the organism', the fully functioning person thus being Rogers' idealized conception of someone fully doing so (1959: 196). In his 1980 Foundations' article, though, Rogers construes the actualizing tendency as being 'part of a strong formative tendency in our universe, which is evident at all levels' (1980:134). In doing so he draws links with theorising in the natural sciences at the 'inorganic and organic level', particularly

with complexity theory and its construal of movement towards 'increased order and interrelated complexity' (p. 126). Rogers now conceives the fully functioning person's development of all their capacities as movement towards increasing complexity, and as such 'guided by the evolutionary flow' and 'participating in this larger, creative, formative tendency' (pp. 127-128).

(2) Post-Rogers theorising

Various person-centred authors have followed in Rogers' footsteps in seeking to further develop his thinking along this science based path. In what follows we highlight in particular the work of Neville (2012) and Ellingham (2002), who have sought to integrate the views of Whitehead into person-centred theory; Jürgen Kriz (2006, 2007, 2009), who has similarly made use of interdisciplinary dynamic systems theory; Gill Wyatt, who in an equivalent fashion has drawn on Koestler's concept of the 'holon'; and a number of authors identified by Suzanne Keys (2013) who have linked person-centred theory with ecological thought. However, due to its explication in chapter 21, we will not discuss the work of Greenberg and his associates who have developed Emotion-Focused Therapy by integrating biologically based, neo-Piagetian ideas with key ideas of person-centred theory and Gestalt therapy theory.

(i) Whiteheadians

In taking on board Prigogine's 'science of complexity', Rogers also acquiesces in Prigogine's judgement that there is a 'strong resemblance' and a sharing of 'deep collective vision' between such a science of complexity and Whitehead's philosophy (Rogers, 1980, p. 132). Given that Whitehead's philosophy has been termed *Process-Relational Philosophy* (Mesle, 2008), the claim of a significant concordance between the views of Rogers and those of Whitehead is perhaps not surprising.

Indeed Tudor and Worrall (2005) have gone so far as to posit that they see Whitehead's *magnum opus*, *Process and reality*, 'as the *philosophical* ground for organismic psychology and for the theory and practice of person-centred theory' (p. 49).

Such a valuing and judgement on Whitehead's philosophy derives from the fact that as a mathematician and logician of the first rank, Whitehead appreciated the revolution in worldview inherent in the developments in modern physics and the doctrine of evolution. Such an appreciation led him to see a linkage between 'all levels of the cosmic system', as Rogers might put it, especially those of mind and body - Whitehead being deeply interested in overcoming Descartes' 'bifurcation' of nature. 'The reality is the process', posited Whitehead (1925/1967: 72); the same dynamic units of process/pulsating events (Piaget would say 'schemata') making up the physical realm as well as the mental, and all other realms—all events pulsing into being, becoming actualized, due to the workings of an underlying creative principle.

It was on this basis that Whitehead sought to develop what Schmid (2013) terms an 'anthropology', an image of us as human beings as 'process immersed in process beyond ourselves' (Whitehead,1938: 8), an image that integrates the idea of the field theory of modern physics with that of the biological conception of the living organism. Alternatively termed 'the philosophy of organism', Whitehead's philosophy thus seeks to conceptually explain in process terms both the being and the becoming of persons, their substantiality and relationality, those two perspectives referred to by Schmid (2013) that emulate the conjoint wave-particle of modern physics.

More recently, Neville (2007, 2012) has also looked to Whitehead to enhance the process-relational aspect of Rogers' thought, particularly in his book *The Life of*

Things. Neville's claim is that Rogers' 'psychology is essentially a process psychology, and his reflections on therapy in *A Way of Being* make sense when viewed in the context of Whitehead's process view of cosmology' (Neville, 2007: 271). Neville foregrounds, too, that Whitehead's conception of the way the different levels of process make up the cosmos is after the fashion of the 'nested hierarchy' of developmental 'gradations of rhythm' (2012: 80). It is such a characterization that Ellingham (2002), acknowledging the influence of Whitehead, also highlights as intrinsic to Rogers' formulation of the formative tendency, a conception that applies to 'beings' at all levels, including the human being.

(ii) *Multi-level Dynamic and Organismic Systems Theorising*

Beyond reference to Whitehead, other authors have further elaborated upon Rogers' natural science process-relational formulation of person-centred theory—particularly insofar as they posit a multi-level developmental character to personal 'growth' and to the resulting structure of the human organism. Thereby they seek to remedy, Rogers' failing to conceive the nature of the human organism in this fashion, a failure pinpointed by John Shlien (Shlien, 2003, p. 216).

Seeman (2001, 2008) developed a multi-level scheme he termed 'the human system model'. But it is Kriz who has emerged as the foremost proponent of a dynamic systems model within person-centred theorising. Kriz integrates concepts drawn from modern systems and chaos theory as a means of valuing and deepening understanding of actualization and self-actualization in the context of a relational conception of the person (Kriz, 2006). Kriz (2009) speaks of developing a 'person-centered systems theory', in particular by drawing upon 'Synergetics', a 'mainly mathematical' version of 'the interdisciplinary systems approach' (p. 2). On this

basis, says Kriz, he has 'proposed a multi-level concept of somatic, ecological-interactive, psychic, and socio-cultural processes' as a means of understanding 'the process of constructing meaning and stability in our Lebenswelt' (life-space). Kriz notes that Synergetics links with other systems' approaches, such as Prigogine's in seeking to explain the occurrence of 'self-organized order and the phase transition of order into other order'. We can see resonance with these ideas in the work of Bohart, Joseph and Murphy. Bohart for example, suggests that more emphasis should be placed upon 'human *agency'* and the client's 'self-righting' ability to 'make therapy work' (Bohart and Tallman, 1999: 58). While in the same vein, Joseph and Murphy (2013) propose what can be called 'self-organized order' when they hypothesize the notion of post traumatic growth.

Also relevant to this idea of systems is the theorising of Wyatt who in emphasizing the 'generative flow of the formative tendency' introduces Koestler's hierarchical scheme of the 'holon'. As Wyatt (2013) describes, 'a holon's nature is to be both a part at one level and a whole at a different level', such that 'as each new level of complexity is reached emergent properties appear' (p. 111). To some extent Wyatt knits together the 'I-Thou' and natural science strand in Rogers' 'Foundations' article, for she introduces such ideas as a means of describing her research into 'relational depth' in a group setting. This idea of experiencing relational depth, of enjoying 'I-Thou' experience, in a group, Wyatt sees as part of the overarching, formative tendency generated 'evolutionary task' of actualizing 'a shift away from fragmentation and lack of concern for others and the earth toward developing relational capacities and world-centric values' (p. 111). Here Wyatt is especially in tune with the emphasis that both Neville and Kriz place on person-centred theory and practice resonating with ecological caring for people, animals, plants, and

stones, indeed for the cosmos as a whole - of person-centred therapy being part and parcel of enjoyment of an 'I-Thou' relationship, 'at all levels', as Rogers would say.

In her editorial for a *PECP* special issue, 'Ecology and Person-Centered (sic) and Experiential Psychotherapies', Keys (2013) lists additional writers who have contributed to person-centred ecological theorising. In their various ways these theorists *explicitly* conceptualise human beings as intimately related and inextricably connected to the world. Describing person-centred theory as 'grounded within an organismic-biological-ecological model of the person' Chatalos (2013: 357) articulates the different aspects of theory and experience that give substance to this notion of the I:Thou relationship at all levels.

Concluding Remarks

In considering themes and perspectives in person-centred theory in the aftermath of Rogers' life, we have

1. grounded our approach upon Kuhn's (1970) notion of a scientific paradigm
2. drawn connections between Rogers' late theorising and theory developments by subsequent person-centred thinkers
3. identified these developments as essentially associated with what we have termed a 'process-relational' paradigm/worldview
4. distinguished two major strands to such developments: a cultural/humanities or Geisteswissenschaft strand and a natural science or Naturwissenschaft strand.

Pondering the question of the further development of person-centred theory and practice, the issues for us are whether and to what extent the two strands can be interwoven to form a greater whole and so provide a unitary conception of what it means to practice person-centred therapy; and whether and to what extent each may be developed in its own right as alternative ways of conceiving and engaging in such practice.

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