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# On the Quest for a Person-Centred Paradigm

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> *We need to examine some of the reasons why our intellectual culture is itself so sceptical about the kind of large-scale theories which alone might serve to displace psychoanalysis.*
> (Richard Webster, 1995, p. 441)

In a recent article in *Counselling* (Ellingham, 1995), I made use of Thomas Kuhn's (1970) description of a scientific paradigm for the purpose of illuminating the relationship between the person-centred and psychodynamic approaches to counselling/psychotherapy[1]. I sought to clarify in particular the two schools' disagreement over whether 'counselling' and 'psychotherapy' are the same or different--the person-centred view being that the two terms refer to a unitary phenomenon; the psychodynamic that the terms refer to different phenomena, albeit interrelated along a continuum.

What I said in my paper caused a certain amount of consternation among some psychodynamic practitioners (cf. *Counselling,* 7 [1]: 10-11). This I took to be hardly surprising as I had dared to suggest that a future paradigm (i.e. 'global theory') of counselling/psychotherapy would be based not upon the psychodynamic framework of thought but the person-centred. In the present article I re-visit and elaborate upon ideas put forward in my earlier piece.

## On Presuming a Paradigm

According to Kuhn, the mark of scientific understanding is the possession among members of a particular discipline of a common framework of ideas, a unitary theory or 'paradigm' by which to define the discipline's proper subject matter and legitimate methodological procedures. While the great pioneers of the field of c/p aimed to generate scientific understanding, it is patently obvious that the field still lacks a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense. What it boasts instead, as colourfully described by Hans Eysenck, is 'a mish-mash of theories, a hugger-mugger of procedures, a gallimaufry of therapies, and a charivara of activities having no proper rationale' (1970, p. 145). Thus the more deeply a person becomes immersed 'in the study of the dozens of theories and approaches to counselling and psychotherapy', the more, avows Cecil Patterson,

> he or she...develops the feeling of being in a jungle. Differences, inconsistencies, and contradictions appear at all levels, from philosophy to techniques. (1986, p. 532).

[1] Throughout this article, in accord with the person-centred tradition I shall treat the terms 'counselling' and 'psychotherapy', and their cognates, as referring to a unitary phenomenon. I employ the composite 'counselling/psychotherapy' ('c/p' for short) to emphasize this point.

Does such a state of affairs matter? In my view: Yes, very much! What kind of scientific undertaking is it that can't agree on how best to make sense of a particular person's psychological difficulties, or how best to help that person? Go to one counsellor with depression and you are told to think positive thoughts; to another and you are encouraged to unearth the negative; to a third and you are allowed to focus on what you like; to a fourth and you are taught how to plan your day; to a fifth and you are expected to bare your soul to an empty chair, etc., etc.

Such a disconnected application of disparate procedures would be remedied with establishment of a paradigm.

But is it simply pie in the sky to dream of developing one?

Some authorities in the field of c/p certainly suggest that it is. The authors of 'The Counsellor's Handbook' (1994), for instance, define 'counselling' on the basis of what they term 'an integrative process model' (p. 35). But the non-integrative nature of such a model is made only too plain in their confession that it is based on the assumption that 'people are too complex to be explained by any one theory' (ibid.).

And then again there is John McLeod's puzzling pronouncement that '[c]ounselling is in many respects an unusual area of study in that it encompasses a set of strongly competing theoretical perspectives, a wide range of practical applications and meaningful inputs from a number of contributing disciplines' (1993, p.7). McLeod's assertion is puzzling to me because having acknowledged these 'competing theoretical perspectives', he goes on to declare that, '[t]he field of counselling and psychotherapy represents a *synthesis* of ideas from science, philosophy, religion and the arts' (my italics). 'It is an interdisciplinary area', he contends,

> that cannot appropriately be incorporated or subsumed into any one of its constituent disciplines. Any approach to counselling which was, for example, purely scientific or purely religious in nature would soon be seen not to be counselling at all, in its denial of key areas of client and practitioner experience. (pp. 7-8)

Why I find McLeod's avowal puzzling is because (a) 'a synthesis of ideas' is a theory, so that having been told the field is made up of competing theories we then seem to be informed that there is nevertheless a single overarching theory, i.e. a paradigm; (b) McLeod seems to be suggesting that what common-sense takes to be disparate aspects of human mental functioning--scientific, philosophical, religious and artistic thought--can never be understood scientifically, i.e. interpreted in terms of a unitary paradigm, the achievement of which, in my view, constitutes the goal and *raison d'etre* of a scientific psychology.

Given, therefore, that both McLeod and the authors of 'The Counsellor's Handbook' have a background in academic psychology, what appears to be showing through in their opinions is the unease with which psychologists regard the notion of a scientific paradigm apropos psychology.

For the field of c/p may fairly be said to be a sub-field or daughter discipline of the overall domain of psychology; while the parent is concerned with scientific understanding of 'behaviour and mental processes', per se, the daughter discipline of c/p aims to achieve such understanding with respect to certain aspects of human behaviour and mental processes. It is not surprising to learn, therefore, that the diverging and competing theoretical perspectives which fragment the daughter are part and parcel of theoretical perspectives which fragment the parent (viz. the behavioural, cognitive, humanistic, psychodynamic, physiological perspectives). In consequence, as McLeod recounts, behind the debate concerning the development of a unitary theory of c/p lies the question 'of whether it is even in principle possible to create a universally acceptable framework for understanding human behaviour [and mental processes]' (p. 99)--whether, that is, it will ever be feasible to generate a scientific paradigm for psychology.

Thus, unless a unitary and authoritative scheme of thought can be generated, a scheme in terms of which genuine scientific understanding can be fabricated, both psychology and the field of c/p will remain made up of quasi-religious cliques exhibiting divergent beliefs. It is little wonder that Arnold Lazarus admonishes those within the field of c/p '[t]o step out of the field of theology and enter the realm of science' (Dryden & Norcross, 1990, p. 45).

**On presuming a person-centred not a psychodynamic paradigm**

'Revolution' is a key notion of Kuhn's regarding the advance of scientific understanding and the emergence of paradigms: revolution in terms of the fundamentally different view of the world which a novel paradigm introduces compared to a previous paradigm or to competing pre-paradigm theories. Kuhn likens such a revolution to switches of visual gestalt: the switch from the chalice to the two faces, from the young woman to the old lady.

Perhaps from what I have said already, it has become clear just how revolutionary it would be for a paradigm of c/p to be developed: for a unitary theoretical perspective to be formulated which truly synthesised the field of c/p's present cacophony of 'ideas from science, philosophy, religion and the arts', one which grasped in a single frame not only the variety of procedures employed in c/p, but also the diverse aspects of the counselling client (the physical, chemical, biological, animal, mental, spiritual, whatever).

It is not only psychologists but individuals in general who are likely to say that a vision of this kind is beyond the bounds of common-sense.

But that is exactly the point! Such a unitary vision must of necessity be beyond the bounds of contemporary conception, because current common-sense cannot contain it. To sense a comprehensive order and unity to things beyond the confines of present conceptualisation is the mark of a mystic, which is why in my earlier article I spoke of a paradigm for the field of c/p coming about through 'the further articulation of a truth which mystics such as Carl Rogers have previously intuited' (p. 290). For, I would claim, it was Rogers--the originator and main architect of person-centred theory--who not only sensed an ultimate pattern to things but who in his formulation of it articulated it in a manner suitable for development into a bona fide paradigm.

Rogers' vision is part of 'a deep collective vision' in terms of which others, not necessarily psychologists, have formulated ideas congruent with his. Descriptive terms such as 'holistic', 'organismic', 'process', 'field theory' and 'systems theory' identify the formulations of individuals so in tune with Rogers' person-centred theorizing. It is, I would claim, by comparison with the theoretical expositions of these other like-minded theorists that we will be able to hone and augment current person-centred ideas and so move towards the development of a paradigm for the field of c/p. Particular thinkers I have in mind in this regard are Ernst Cassirer, Susanne Langer, Fritz Perls, Jean Piaget, Michael Polanyi, Rupert Sheldrake, Heinz Werner and Alfred North Whitehead.

Allow me to suggest, therefore, what in my view are likely to be some key features of such a paradigm:

(1) *the person will be defined in process terms, part and parcel of a universe so defined.*

What this means is that patterned activity, process, constitutes the fundamental concept by which to make scientific sense of ourselves and the world in which we dwell. In 'Rogers' anthropology', writes Harry Van Belle (1980),

> man is first of all a tendency, a process, an activity or functioning rather than an entity.... Originally man is an organism, and remains this however he might change and however complex his activity may become. (p. 71)

What other process thinkers can bring to person-centred theory in this regard is a deeper understanding both of what it means to view the person as an organism, a complex pattern of activity, and of how the oneness of the human organism can be conceptualised as one with the overarching 'organism' of the universe. In particular, the oneness of the human organism can be expressed in conceptual terms, with 'body', 'mind' and 'spirit' conceived as manifestations of different patterns of process.

(2) *more specifically the person and the universe will be defined in terms of the process of growth, of becoming*.

Thanks in large measure to Darwin and Einstein, the contemporary scientific paradigm already envisages the physical universe as a structural field of evolving processes. Rogers' conceptualisation of the person in terms of a growth process (the 'actualizing tendency') which is an aspect of a universal process of becoming (the 'formative tendency') fits harmoniously into such an overall scheme.

(3) *like all organisms, the structure of the human organism will be interpreted as a hierarchy of increasingly complex patterns of process, patterns which have emerged over the course of evolution.*

According to Rogers, thanks to the workings of 'a strong formative tendency in our universe, which is evident at all levels' (1980, p. 134), 'every form that we see or know emerged from a simpler, less complex form' (p. 125). Other process theorists make explicit that a corollary of Rogers' hypothesis is that each organism possesses a hierarchical structure related to the different forms or patterns of process from which it evolved. One person with much to contribute to person-centred theory in this regard is Michael Polanyi. For not only does Polanyi speak of 'the hierarchy of levels found in living beings' and avow that '[w]e can see all the levels of evolution at a glance in

the individual human being' (1966, p. 36), but he also elucidates the logical principles linking such levels to each other and how disorder may be interpreted--this last a particularly important notion in relation to understanding psychological dysfunction.

(4) *consciousness and unconsciousness will be defined in relative terms as aspects of process.*

As Rogers writes,

> The ability to focus conscious attention seems to be one of the latest evolutionary developments of our species. This ability can be described as a tiny peak of awareness, of symbolizing capacity, topping a vast pyramid of nonconscious organismic functioning. (1980, p. 127)

Psychodynamic theory treats the categories of conscious and unconscious as fundamental categories of conception. Such an interpretation derives from Descartes' identification of consciousness with 'mind', one of his two basic and unmixable categories of reality, 'mind' and 'matter'. In a paradigm which treats 'process' as fundamental, both mind and matter, consciousness and unconsciousness, are manifestations of patterns of activity. One cannot ask what 'stuff' or 'substance' process is comprised of, for it is fundamental. As Whitehead puts it, 'The reality is the process' (1925, p. 72 ). On such a scenario, what is conscious or unconscious is a relative affair, relative to the character of the pattern of process comprising the human individual and to the character of the processes comprising the surrounding field. On the one hand, like Lancelot Whyte, we may postulate a single realm of processes 'continuous and mainly unconscious, of which only certain transitory aspects or phases are accessible to immediate conscious attention' (1960, p. 18); on the other, posit that in association with the different levels of process comprising the human organism there exist different levels or degrees of consciousness. Such a view is in accord with not only Rogers (cf. Evans, 1975, p. 6), but also Erich Fromm when he declares that:

> There is no such thing as 'the conscious' and no such thing as 'the unconscious'. There are degrees of consciousness-awareness and unconsciousness-unawareness....Unconsciousness...represents the plant in him [man], the animal in him, the spirit in him; it represents the past down to the dawn of human awareness. (1986, pp. 62 & 58)

It is a view which allies, too, with the 'new paradigm' in psychology championed by Rom Harré, i.e. 'discursive psychology'--according to which,

> discursive phenomena, for example, acts of remembering, are not manifestations of hidden, subjective, psychological phenomena. They *are* the psychological phenomena. Sometimes they have subjective counterparts; sometimes they do not. (Harré & Gillett, 1994, p. 27)

What, though, of Freud's 'primary processes', those processes whose 'paradoxical logic' constitutes the hallmark of the psychodynamic unconscious? That such processes can be fitted into a person-centred process paradigm has been made plain by Charles Rycroft when he 'argues that Freud's theory of the non-verbal

"primary processes" of the unconscious...is better expressed by [Susanne ] Langer's concept of "non-discursive" symbolism' (Lomas, 1987, p. 42). Langer, of course, is a process theorist. For her non-discursive symbolization represents a type of process, that which marks the evolutionary appearance of the first humans (cf. Langer, 1982). By thus regarding the human being as the symbolizing animal, or 'animal symbolicum', as Ernst Cassirer (1944, p. 28) puts it, we are able to augment current person-centred theory when it postulates that positive personality change involves accurate symbolization to awareness (cf. Rogers, 1959).

**Conclusion**

Kurt Lewin was fond of observing that '[t]here is nothing as practical as a good theory' (Marrow, 1969, p. 128). As the best theory for its time, that theory which becomes a paradigm is the most practical of all. I would like to think that this article has made some contribution, however small, to the generation of such a theory.

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