

Not in a Glasgow Pub

The Tribes of the Person-Centred Nation: An Introduction to the Schools of Therapy Related to the Person-centred Approach, 2nd edn

Edited by: Pete Sanders

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One day, during a weekend residential training in person-centred psychotherapy, I felt deeply moved by what a facilitator had said in response to a dilemma I was wrestling with at the time. I thanked her for the ability to listen so empathically. Her response was: 'It's not me. It's the power of the person-centred approach.' I felt puzzled and disappointed: it wasn't *her* responding to *me*, person to person. Instead it was this semi-mystical thing, 'the power of the PCA.'

On another occasion in the same training, I casually asked during group process why there was no room in the building dedicated to Freud. Every room in the large middle-class suburban house that was our school bore the name of a psychological pioneer – Rogers, Klein, Jung, Maslow, Perls, but no Freud. 'Sure we can do that – the tutor promptly retorted to the general hilarity – we can give him the toilet.' I was mystified: in my naivety, I had thought an acknowledgement of Freud, the very first pioneer, would be obvious. What I didn't know at the time was that alongside valuable therapeutic theory and practice, I was being schooled in the way of tribalism, of what Richard Worsley, in one of the best chapters in this book, aptly calls 'ghetto mentality'. This is not to say that parochialism is a person-centred specialty: too many times in meetings with fellow supervisors and tutors I heard colleagues from other orientations disparaging person-centred therapy (PCT) as superficial, implicitly bolstering the superiority of their own tribe.

The term 'tribes' in the title of this book is indicative – perhaps both deliberate nod at the radical genuineness of the noble savage in touch with inherent human goodness as well as unwitting admission of the dangers of endogamy latent in all tribes. The term 'nation' is

equally problematic: for one thing, a nation is an *imagined community* (Anderson, 1982), a fiction that helps to prop up a wobbly identity. More crucially, a nation has borders; it inevitably leaves out of its walled domain anything considered 'alien'.

What does this book leave out? With the exception of a couple of pages in Tony Merry's excellent chapter on classical client-centred therapy, there is no discussion of two intrinsically related and essential tenets of PCT: *the organism* and *the actualising tendency*. These key metaphors are found in Rogers, and are best articulated in contemporary literature by Tudor and Worrall (2006), two authors among the many conspicuous absences from this book.

Once the key metaphors are abandoned, we end up clutching at the rafts of any available theory. Keith Tudor and Mike Worrall have demonstrated how the central tenet of person-centred therapy, the 'organism', is not exclusively linked to the good-old days of client-centred therapy but can be creatively (and coherently) linked to (among others) Whitehead's process philosophy. Personally I believe that without holding the notion of the organism firmly in the background, PCT becomes just another shiny item in the ever-expanding superstore of cosmetic psychologies. Equally absent in this overwhelming male collection are the seminal writings of Gillian Proctor, Suzanne Keys, Elizabeth Freire, Katija Chandler, Margaret Warner, Jo Hilton and Dagmar Edwards, to name but a few. There is no mention of Colin Lago and his ground-breaking work in the trans-cultural domain, or of Ivan Ellingham's far-reaching philosophical insights.

So sweeping has the term 'person-centred' become in recent years that it may soon join the ranks of that other fashionable term, 'mindfulness' (Brazier, 2014). The problem with any overused word is that it becomes meaningless. With Carl Rogers' theory of personality being almost unanimously (and erroneously) perceived as paper-thin, person-centred therapy is unceremoniously relegated, in most training courses, to the 'secondary' role of establishing a good working alliance, before either heavy-weight theorising, 'in-depth' probing of the 'real', 'originary' causes of distress (or, conversely, the philistine pragmatism of solution-focused reprogramming) is introduced, courtesy of other theoretical orientations.

If readers take this collection of essays assembled by Pete Sanders as in any way representative of the person-centred approach, than it would seem that the prevailing prejudice (of person-centred therapy having little

theoretical substance) affects person-centred therapists as well, for every contributor here impatiently swerves from the key metaphors of the approach.

As a collection of interesting and thought-provoking articles, this book works a treat, with Robert Elliott providing a very informative and stimulating introduction to Emotion Focused Therapy, Campbell Purton doing something similar for Focusing, and Mick Cooper proposing parallels between aspects of PCT and existential psychotherapy (including Ronnie Laing's remark that Rogers wouldn't survive for more than two minutes in a Glasgow pub). Trainees and tutors in the humanistic field will find plenty of useful material.

As a map of PCT, the book is interesting, for it reflects the paradox of the institutional version of the approach. What is the paradox? Simply put, wanting your (radical) cake and eating it, i.e. maintaining cutting-edge credibility whilst patching up a wobbly theoretical foundation through a generic and, to this reader, conservative appeal to 'pluralism', professionalisation and half-digested theories borrowed from other orientations.

The self-appointed 'schools of therapy related to the PCA' (as the subtitle has it) seem to represent at first a rich multiplicity. In reality, they read as a patchwork of vaguely compatible views held together by a broad appreciation of the work of Carl Rogers. Some of the 'recent developments' (pp. 187–232) – particularly Pre-Therapy (the truly impressive work initiated by Gary Prouty and summarised here by Sanders) – add something genuinely new and ground-breaking which builds on the tenets of PCT. Other developments liberally rely on Object Relations, Christian religiosity, and rebranded forms of behaviourism whilst wanting to hold on to the umbilical Rogerian cord.

The person-centred tradition is a living and changing entity, as Worsley states in his chapter on 'Integrative PCT' (pp 161–86). But a living entity possesses an organismic continuum that is sadly lacking in some of the 'tribal' expressions championed in this volume. 🌀

References

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