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Pandas in a zoo: facilitating encounter in institutional settings

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a personal experience of facilitating encounter groups within person-centered training in some UK's universities and colleges. It centered around the following questions: Does the person-centered approach (PCA) become sterilized within institutions increasingly run like businesses, where trainees are seen as customers and tutors as functionaries? What are the challenges and rewards of facilitating encounter within these settings? What are the contradictions, if any, within the philosophy of encounter within the PCA?

Des pandas dans un zoo: Faciliter la rencontre en contexte institutionnel.

Cet article présente une expérience personnelle de facilitation de groupes de rencontre au sein de formations centrées sur la personne dans quelques universités et collèges du RoyaumeUni. Il se concentre sur quelques questions. L'Approche centrée sur la personne (ACP) devient-elle stérile dans des institutions de plus en plus gérées comme des entreprises lorsque les étudiants sont considérés comme des consommateurs, et les enseignants tuteurs comme des fonctionnaires ? Quels sont les défis et les avantages propres à la facilitation de la rencontre au sein de ces dispositifs ? Quelles sont les contradictions, pour autant qu'il y en ait, au sein de la philosophie de la rencontre propre à l'ACP ?

Pandas im Zoo: Encounter in institutionellen Settings

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel skizziert eine persönliche Erfahrung zur Facilitation von Encountergruppen in personenzentrierten Ausbildungen an einigen britischen Universitäten und Colleges. Er kreist um die folgenden Fragen: Wird der Personzentrierte Ansatz (PCA) in solchen Institutionen steril, Institutionen, die mehr und mehr wie Unternehmen geführt werden, wo man Auszubildende als Kunden und Unterrichtende als Funktionäre sieht? Wo sind die Herausforderungen und der Lohn, innerhalb solcher Settings Encounter durchzuführen? Wo sind die Widersprüche, wenn vorhanden, innerhalb der Philosophie des Encounters im PCA?

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Pandas en un zoológico: facilitando el encuentro en entornos institucionales

Resumen: Este documento describe una experiencia personal de facilitar grupos de encuentro dentro de capacitaciones centradas en la persona en algunas universidades y colegios del Reino Unido. Se centró en las siguientes preguntas: ¿El enfoque centrado en la persona (PCA) se esteriliza dentro de las instituciones que funcionan cada vez más como empresas, donde los alumnos son vistos como clientes y tutores como funcionarios? ¿Cuáles son los desafíos y las recompensas de facilitar el encuentro dentro de estos entornos? ¿Cuáles son las contradicciones, si las hay, dentro de la filosofía del encuentro dentro de la PCA?

Pandas no Jardim Zoológico: a facilitação do Encontro em contexto institucional

Este artigo destaca uma experiência pessoal de facilitação de grupos de encontro no âmbito dos centros de formação centrados na pessoa de algumas faculdades e institutos superiores no Reino Unido. Ele gira em torno das seguintes questões: a ACP torna-se estéril em instituições que são cada vez mais geridas como se fossem negócios, onde os alunos são vistos como clientes e os tutores como funcionários? Quais os desafios e as recompensas da facilitação de encontro nestes contextos? Que contradições, se as houver, surgem no seio da filosofia do encontro segundo a ACP?

On smuggling in encounter

I have been facilitating humanistic, person-centered and existential therapy for over 10 years in universities and colleges. I started enthusiastically each time, and each time my enthusiasm waned, burdened by routine, the mindless pressure to meet targets, my own impatience, or the strain to conform to the ethos of the institution. I added new elements to the proceedings in the attempt to keep it fresh and interesting. Of all the things I've tried, nothing proved more stimulating than encounter. But I had to *smuggle* it in, as my request to make it an integral part of the training was invariably met with either indifference or downright hostility. What could be the reasons for this? Maybe Rogers was on to something when he wrote:

[E]ncounter groups lead to more personal independence, fewer hidden feelings, more willingness to innovate, *more opposition to institutional rigidities*. Hence, if a person is fearful of change in any form, he is rightly fearful of encounter groups. They breed constructive change ... Hence all those who are opposed to change will be ... opposed to the intensive group experience (Rogers, 1970, p. 13, emphasis added).

When I started smuggling encounter, I felt in some cases that I had to sell it to students as something 'didactic', as a more immediate way, I'd venture to say, to experience, for example, the core conditions and later on perhaps reflect on the experience and 'make it useful' for the requirements of the course, whether in the writing of essays or gaining more groundedness and strength in skills practice. All these acrobatics were necessary,

I felt, because at that point in their study, some trainees buy wholesale the idea of being *customers*; they understand that their *satisfaction ratings* are crucial to the overall preservation of the institution's reputation and the maintenance and survival of the institution's managerial and academic staff (Collini, 2018). In any case, once the idea is introduced and the group has taken its first tentative steps, I have observed something like the following taking place.

Encounter as experience/experiment

(1) At first, faced with an unstructured hour unfilled by set tasks, exchanges invariably veer toward struggles with 'technique', questions to the facilitator, and the voicing of difficulties, dissatisfaction or general complaints about the course. This is already a welcome shift, away from an over-regulated setting where there is only space for the formulaic transmission of a purported subject of study – a 'finished product' called PCT – from tutor to students. There is, often for the first time, more genuine, open discussion, as well as the first sporadic expressions, in a group setting, of feelings and emotions. At this stage, however, exchanges are mostly about *it*, i.e. an elusive object of desire called PCT. The tacit assumption is that tutor will impart it by impersonating the expert, while trainees are expected to learn it through the absorption of static theoretical principles and a range of techniques.

(2) At some point in this process (in the same session or during the following weeks), the group tends to morph into a debating society. Individuals start to openly express or vent their opinions, discussing a general topic raised by one member. This process is still indirect, e.g. discussing a person's expressed anger about someone in her life. Here I often find myself compelled to intervene, not without some hesitation, as I struggle to whether I should instead be silent and let things unfold by their own accord. I tend to say something like: 'How does this person's anger affect *you*?'

The general default mood, in groups that haven't experienced encounter before is, at first, elation. They are suddenly being allowed to play freely within a structure that is normally rigid and revolving around a weekly routine of lectures, skills practice and brief check-in sessions or 'personal and professional development' sessions (PPD). Another thing that happens is a shift in focus toward one person who may begin to share personal content and feelings. In one occasion, it was 'Martha' the young woman who declared that she had left her boyfriend the week before. 'I must be a hard bitch but I was done with him', she said in conclusion of her share. People's responses to the change of gear that her intervention signaled in the group were mainly positive and encouraging. What was my role as a facilitator in this particular group? Mainly, I wanted to hold the space, and now and again point something out that either had resonated with me personally or that I felt had reverberated with some in the group. I often feel ambivalent about these interventions. They are motivated by a desire to steer the group away from the 'debating society' mode. But if I do manage to steer the group away, the specter of directivity begins to haunt me: 'Am I being too directive here?' I ask myself. And: 'What is my agenda?' A similar ambivalence is present in Rogers (1970). In one instance, he writes of his struggle to facilitate an encounter with 'high-level educational administrators – probably the most rigid and well-defended group in our culture' (p. 49). Rogers's stated intention is to accept

the group 'where it *is*', even when it wishes to 'intellectualize, or discuss ... superficial problems, or is emotionally very closed'. He goes on to say:

[I]n an evening session the talk became more and more trivial. One person asked, "Are we doing what we *want* to do?" And the answer was an almost unanimous "No". But within moments the talk again became social chatter about matters in which I had no interest. I was in a quandary. In order to allay a considerable early anxiety in the group, I had stressed in the first session that they could make of it exactly what they wished, and operationally they seemed to be saying very loudly, "We want to spend expensive, hard-won weekend time talking of trivia". To express my feelings of boredom and annoyance seemed contradictory to the freedom I had given them. After wrestling within myself for a few moments, I decided that they had a perfect right to talk trivia, and I had a perfect right not to endure it. So I walked quietly out of the room and went to bed (Rogers, 1970, p. 49)

(3) At some point, interventions from participants become more immediate, direct, and more attuned to whatever takes place in the room. Interactions tend to focus on the present and there is a shift, roughly speaking from the 'negative' to the 'positive', i.e. from the voicing of aggression and anger to the tentative disclosure of affection, tenderness and love. 'Why are negatively toned expressions the first current feelings to be expressed?' Rogers asked (1970, p. 19) before speculating that this may be 'one of the best ways to test the freedom and trustworthiness of the group' (ibid).

Some fifty years ago Rogers reflected on how encounter groups had 'grown up entirely outside the "establishment"' with 'most universities still look[ing] upon [them] with scorn' (1970, p. 1). In my experience, this is still the case. When encounter is not being looked upon with scorn, it's because academic institutions either have not heard of it, or because they regard it with a mixture of alarm and disdain – as a quaint ritual practiced in the olden days of humanistic psychology but irrelevant to how therapy is 'taught' and 'managed' today in a learning environment that favors productivity above all else. One conclusion drawn by a research study conducted in the early nineteen-seventies with over 1000 participants was that encounter groups 'do little for productivity, work or school problems' (Bebout & Gordon, 1972, p. 117). Encounter could be seen as the one instance unmistakably revealing the experimental and experiential nature of the therapeutic enterprise and of person-centered therapy (PCT) in particular. *Experience* and *experiment* share the same Latin root *experiri*, i.e. to try or attempt, with the French term *expérience* denoting both. Therapy itself is, in my understanding, experience/experiment (Bazzano, 2019; Russell, 2017), and if this claim is legitimate, then PCT cannot be easily assimilated into the recyclable knowledge of universities, least of all 'integrated' within a discourse currently ruled by data and metrics, and demanding tiresome recitation of time-honored tenets in essays and case studies. Personally, I experience this as a soul-destroying process of *acculturation* (aka indoctrination) rather than the transmission of a living *culture* (Bazzano, 2017). Through it, the art/science of PCT ceases to be experience/experiment and becomes a commodity. On the whole, my experience as a trainer tells me that if and when adequate space is given to the intensive group experience known as 'encounter', (a foundational practice at the origins of the PCA), the experiential/experimental nature of the approach openly comes to light, cutting through some of the political contortions some of us feel we must perform.

Encounter as education

Despite many instances where the experience was rewarding for the group (and for me as a facilitator), I am also painfully aware of how precarious this experiment truly is. All I am able to offer, I feel, is a fleeting taste, through encounter, of the PCA. However, when not enough space is allocated, the experience often feels unresolved or truncated; in these instances the shift from the 'negative' to the 'positive' does not occur, and even the expression of 'negative' feelings is not suitably explored. One example may help illustrate this point and before I relate it I'd like to recount a dream I had shortly before.

I am in a village near the Chinese mountains with a group of people. They say we are going to walk out of the village and into the wilderness. There is a linear continuum between town and wilderness: they don't say this, but what they mean with their easy-going way is that the land is the same. It's just that here you have buildings and there you don't. But I don't see it that way at all. Out there you can encounter pandas, bears and crocodiles. It's dangerous out there while here in the village you can find shelter in a building. I don't say any of this for fear of appearing cowardly. I go along with it, walk out into the wilderness but deep within I know, it's a terrible idea.

The difficulties and unpredictability arising at times for a facilitator (and for participants) in an encounter group can be broadly related to the untamed aspect communicated to me by the above dream. These difficulties were interestingly enough confirmed by an experience shortly afterward.

I facilitated an encounter group as a visiting tutor on one of the humanistic course units on the PCA. Things had gone more or less 'harmoniously', if somewhat blandly, for the first hour, until I decided to voice, after some hesitation, that I felt rather 'bored' and that I wondered if it was just my mood that day or if it had to do with what was happening in the room. Someone in the group voiced her discontent and opposition to what, to her, seemed like 'just another educational gimmick to manipulate and indoctrinate' her. From this point on, she saw every subsequent attempt on my part to respond congruently to her as yet another way to 'show' or 'teach' something, saying at one point 'You are just experimenting with us in a lab'. In doing so, I felt she was playing to the crowd, throwing in inconsequential things to get a laugh. I asked whether this had to do with what she had disclosed in the first part of the meeting, namely that she felt anxious about this sort of exercise. I added that if this was the case, anxiety is part of a natural response, even though difficult. She expressed a personal and strong dislike toward me, saying I was manipulating the group, that this process was not genuine but artificial, like a lab, an 'educational setting'. She didn't believe a word I was saying, she said, adding that it was all fake. I responded that I was hurt by her comment. I felt shaken but tried all the same to hold some kind of facilitation. I suggested that often in an encounter group 'negative' emotions come out first, perhaps as a way to 'test' the situation. Another participant pointed out that our exchange was valuable because 'for once it felt real'. It felt as if a door opened and I sighed with relief, but it was only a moment. The door shut quickly again as I realized that by this time the group's cohesion had been severely disrupted. Two of the participants started complaining at length about being thrown in at the deep end and not been given enough theoretical material. I became angry, and raised my voice, saying that within the whole first hour of our unit I had discussed theory and nothing but and if someone had not taken notice, where the hell had they been? Even before finishing my

sentence I could see the shock on the participants' faces. Clearly, during 1 year and a half of training, they had never witnessed in a group the expression of a raw emotion, even though, it must be said, I had not pointed at anyone in particular during my outburst but instead said it, as it were, to the room. The two people who had been complaining about the lack of theory were quick to retort that they were not talking about me but their primary tutor.

I apologized for my strong words, adding, however, that this was not the ideal moment to complain about their primary tutor. I am not certain about the validity of my whole intervention here but know that I felt motivated by a desire to have as genuine an interaction as the circumstances allowed. I also overlooked how this last aspect – using the possibility to speak freely often unleashing discontent about the course itself – is fairly common in this sort of setting. The trouble was, by this time our allotted time had expired, which meant there was no chance to sit together and work through this difficult moment.

Instead, some of the trainees complained via e-mail to the school about what they considered my 'unorthodox' facilitation. Interestingly, they all said they were shocked by my congruent expression of hurt, reading it as inability to 'keep it together'. Being used to tutors routinely giving a PowerPoint presentation and later assigning role-playing exercises, this approach felt positively strange. Similarly, they felt that my expression of anger was unacceptable. This comment proved difficult for me to hear as I already berated myself for having expressed anger and frustration at the group, even though without pointing the finger at anyone in particular. Did my tiredness play a part at the end of a grueling week of work? The above instance gave me a lot to reflect on: its unpredictability made me think about my need to learn more about encounter and group dynamics in general. Could I have done differently? Had I been naive in believing that the congruent, empathic communication fostered in encounter groups naturally results, despite moments of conflict in honestly shared experience rather than conflict becoming a stumbling block?

From this point on, I began to liken the experience of facilitating encounter in institutional settings to watching pandas in a zoo. Pandas are cute and affectionate in appearance and demeanor, but they are also fierce and scary. The pressure and stress I have experienced in some instances of encounter facilitation all testify to that aspect of encounter facilitation. Pandas are, after all, bears, and can only be approached in a roundabout way and from outside a fence. In order to be accepted within milieus ruled by 'evidence-based' ideologies, the philosophy of encounter is inevitably neutered. This kind of argument is not new, of course, and extensive exploration of its overarching implication can be found in other fields such as social science and medicine (e.g. May, Rapley, Moreira, Finch, & Heaven, 2005)

What stayed with me was that in their strong critique one of the participants had derided the 'exercise' as merely 'educational'. But what is education? The religious and philosophical traditions take its meaning literally, following Plato's notion of maieutics or midwifery, namely 'extracting [the soul's] pre-existent knowledge and wisdom' (Bazzano, 2006, p. 6). The counter-tradition instead sees education as 'the product of an encounter with otherness' (Ibid). Through genuine meeting with the other – through kinship, love *as well as* conflict) – the self learns about the other and itself.

Encounter as faith ritual

In my own experience as a facilitator, the example sketched earlier represents the exception, and it could well be that unfavorable circumstances played a defining role in what went on. The majority of examples at my disposal appear to confirm a desirable trajectory that builds toward increased awareness, greater acceptance of self and others as well as genuine group learning and cohesion. Most examples confirm cherished principles within the PCA, above all that the creation of a microclimate of acceptance, genuineness and understanding fosters connection, growth and healing. Moreover, when introduced in university settings, it brings in a breath of fresh air in notoriously stuffy surroundings.

Encounter took several forms in its history, from T-groups to basic encounter groups to sensitivity training groups (Rogers, 1970). Common threads within these various incarnations have been identified (Rogers, 1970, pp. 6–7), a handful of them essential in distinguishing a group event as ‘encounter’. There is a facilitator (or facilitators) whose aspiration is to ‘develop ... a psychological climate of safety in which freedom of expression and reduction of defensiveness gradually occur’ (Rogers, *ibid.*, p. 6). The notion of *psychological climate* seems crucial, constituting the very ground on which ‘mutual trust develops [and the expression of] real feelings, positive and negative’ as well as the ‘reduction of defensive rigidity’ and the formulation of ‘new ideas ... new directions’ (Rogers, 1970, p. 7).

My implicit belief as a facilitator has often been that in a climate of mutual trust, occurrences such as destructiveness, negativity or communication breakdown can be overcome, or at least *survived*. Recently, however, I started to question this principle. The challenging aspects of the above example made me question whether my ‘belief’ in encounter groups was just that – a belief. While still upholding it as an ethical signpost, I am less able to see it as an article of faith. Reflecting also on my experience over the years as a participant in encounter groups within large settings such as international conferences, a doubt now lingers in my mind: ‘Have we person-centered therapists and facilitators collectively moved away from the notion of encounter as experience/experiment in favor of a view of encounter as a faith ritual? If, for instance, the PCA were a belief system, what would one of its fundamental tenets be? Could it be something like: ‘I believe that an atmosphere of freedom can be created (in encounter groups as in dyads) where we can establish real contact with others, where we can become more communicative, natural and flexible, more in touch with our feelings, with the experience of others and our own’? Whether or not the above is true – or attainable, or even valid only as a worthy ethical aspiration – it may be worthwhile asking: (a) is it *desirable*? And, assuming that it is attainable: (b) what would be missing from the picture?

I found, if not exactly answers to the above, motivating and inspiring pointers from outside the PCA, particularly from debates within the areas of poststructuralist feminism, menswork, critical theory and transgender experience. It is here that I found my doubts not merely justified, but amplified. These debates have begun to inform my experience and understanding as a person-centered practitioner and encounter facilitator and enabled me to review and develop my reading of Rogers.

Alienation: historical or ontological?

Rogers (1972) lists a couple of points that in his view make encounter significant. First of all, the intensive group encounter 'appears to be a significant part of the cultural attempt to meet the isolation of contemporary life' (p. ix). He adds:

I am not fond of the faddish elements in it, but in general the small group experience fills a need. From a social point of view, I believe we are sufficiently affluent that our physical needs are met, and now what would we most like to have? We would like to be free from the *alienation* that is much part of urban life, so much *part of our life in general*. We would like somehow to find ourselves in real contact with other persons, and I believe this desire, without question, is one of the elements that gives much of the magnetism to the intensive group experience. The person who has come close to *experiencing a real I-Thou relationship in a group* is no longer an isolated individual (pp. ix-x, emphasis added).

Other texts on encounter in the early nineteen-seventies similarly refer to 'alienation' (Bebout & Gordon, 1972, pp. 91–92) and 'socioemotional alienation' (ibid, p. 101) without defining it, although its meaning can be inferred in sentences such as the following:

It is easy to suppose that alienation should lessen with encounter group experience, as the aim and prospect of these groups is to generate a meaningful relatedness with people (Ibid, p. 101).

Bebout and Gordon (1972) studied over 1000 encounter group participants and 100 facilitators as part of a four-year research investigation 'into the value of encounter groups for personal and interpersonal growth' (p. 83). The 'significant positive changes' they found in participants vary from increases in self-esteem to modification in the self-concept in a positive direction to '*alienation* [becoming] reduced' and 'interpersonal relations becom[ing] more empathic' (p. 117, emphasis added).

The underlying fear of 'alienation' in this perspective may well betray a sort of manic defense against solitude. Is encounter literature and the philosophy of encounter in the PCA emphasizing togetherness *against* rather than *alongside* the equally valuable human need for aloneness? The following scenario has become routine for me personally and may or may not be indicative of what may be construed as 'person-centered culture'. I often go to person-centered international conferences and related events. During breaks between presentations, discussions and encounter sessions, at times I find myself alone, enjoying being quiet and with my own thoughts, happily sipping a cup of coffee. Almost invariably, someone comes up to me and says 'Are you alright? You look so forlorn'. The implication in that innocent remark may be that being seen talking to others is seen as preferable to being happily alone. There is a world of difference between valuing empathic connection and fostering a culture of enforced connectivity.

The word alienation comes from the Latin *alienare*, 'to estrange'. But what causes estrangement, and from what? There are essentially two views.

- (a) A *dialectical* view of alienation (Goldmann, 1977; Lukács, 1968) presupposes an estrangement from one's own self and from others that appeared 'in a certain historical condition, with the generalization of market production'. Alienation appears 'with ... *reification*' (Goldmann, 1977, p 33, emphasis added). Reification means turning any entity, in this case a living human being, into a *thing* (*res*), for the purposes of creating

profit for the few. For Lukacs, as for Lefebvre and the Situationists, alienation is the product of the *colonization of everyday life* at the hands of late capitalism.

- (b) An *ontological* (un-historical, non-dialectical) view of alienation is the one that instead predominates in humanistic (and person-centered) culture. The name we have chosen to give to this un-historical view of alienation is, after Heidegger, inauthenticity. Society, history and politics all vanish in this view. It is now down to the person to confront and surpass her alienation through cultivating empathic attunement and striving toward that ultimate narcissistic shibboleth, 'authenticity'.

The second point Rogers makes is that encounter groups are 'an avenue to fulfilment' (ibid, p. x). The third point is that what happens in encounter groups has one important 'philosophical implication', namely: 'The implicit goal of the group process seems to live fully in the here-and-now relationship. I think the parallel with an existential point of view is clear-cut' (ibid, p. x). He also says:

in a climate of freedom, group members move toward becoming more expressive, more spontaneous, more flexible, more closely related to their feelings, more open to their own experience and to that of others (Rogers, 1970, p. x).

For Bebout and Gordon (1972, p. 85), '[t]he term encounter implies that the form of interpersonal meeting practiced is uncommon in the formalities of everyday life'. They quote a passage from Martin Buber to emphasize the uncommonness of encounter groups. But they utterly miss Buber's meaning, a misunderstanding that is indicative of how some of Buber's philosophy has been misconstrued in PC literature.

The passage in question is from *I and Thou* (Buber, 1958/2008, p. 31), in a section titled 'In the Beginning is Relation' where Buber gives examples of non-analytic, pre-grammatical speech from so-called 'primitive' people which are 'charged with presentness' and illustrate the primacy of what he calls 'the wholeness of a relation' (Buber, 1958/2008, ibid). We say 'far away'; the Zulu's word is the equivalent of 'There where someone cries out: "O mother, I am lost"' (ibid). Similarly, (and this is the example quoted by Bebout and Gordon), the Fuegian bypasses western analytical expertise with a word whose condensed meaning is 'They stare at one another, each waiting for the other to volunteer to do what both wish, but are not able to do' (Buber, 1958/2008, p. 31). What is Bebout and Gordon's comment? They write, referring to the Fuegian example: 'This situation is clearly what encounter is not. Our encounter groups anticipate, and usually obtain, emotional openness, self-disclosure, risk-taking, feedback, trust, intimacy, behavioral enactment, willingness to engage and confront others and perhaps to change' (Bebout and Gordon, p. 85). Throughout, Buber is at pain to illustrate the 'total situation [in which] the persons ... are embedded'; his main concern is with the lived relation that these examples show. Bebout and Gordon are instead itching for change and 'positive change' missing entirely the embeddedness of relation.

Conclusion

I believe that there may be something missing in the implicitly accepted philosophy of encounter within the PCA. While the vital role of negation and conflict is acknowledged, the underlying belief is that destructive conflict can be survived at a more 'authentic' or

'congruent' level during a moment of genuine encounter. To this moment of meeting PCA literature has given different formulations, mostly inspired by Buber. Crucially, moments of profound relating are seen as a way of surviving and transcending destruction in the name of inclusiveness. Disputing a similar position found within the theory of intersubjectivity (in this case, in the work of Jessica Benjamin), the philosopher Judith Butler writes:

My question is whether intersubjective space, in its 'authentic' mode, is really ever free of destruction. And if it is free of destruction, utterly, is it also beyond the psyche in a way that is no longer of use to psychoanalysis (Butler, 2004, p. 145)

What Butler critiques here is specifically Jessica Benjamin's notion of *the third* (Benjamin, 1988, 1998), i.e. 'the intersubjective process' itself seen as "a way of surviving the destruction as 'a more liveable and creative "negation'" (Butler, 2004, p. 140). She goes on to say:

If the 'third' is redefined as the music or the harmony of the dialogic encounter, what happens to the other 'thirds'? The child who interrupts the encounter, the former lover at the door or on the phone, the past that cannot be reversed, the future that cannot be contained, the unconscious itself as it rides the emergence of unanticipated circumstance? ... *What discord does that music drown out? What does it disavow in order to be?* (Ibid, pp. 145–146, emphasis added).

In encounter, the complementarity and relationality is not a given but an (often elusive) attainment, something we work toward with difficulty. The missing point in person-centered and humanistic theory is the Hegelian legacy of human relating that Judith Butler draws upon. For Hegel the recognition/acknowledgment between self and other(s) may take place through empathy, love, and friendship, but also, crucially, through *conflict*.

By emphasizing both, Hegel avoided romanticizing encounter; he allowed for the possibility of solidarity and shared endeavor but also recognized ... the ever-present reality of suffering and injustice in human affairs (Bazzano, 2013).

Could it be that the institutional fear of experiments such as encounter groups is rooted in fear of conflict and, through conflict, a fear of the dialectical possibilities for substantial change that would render some methodologies, hierarchies and epistemological assumptions redundant? I want to end with this quote from Rogers, for although this quiet revolutionary did not refer to Hegelian dialectics and their innovative potential, he hinted perhaps at something similar:

A closely related way in which the encounter group may help us to meet the future is as instrument of institutional change. For the future will demand no less in the way of institutional change than of personal change ... Unless government, the schools, churches, industry, and the family can react with great alacrity to the necessity of change, we are indeed a doomed culture (Rogers, 1970, p. 164).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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