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Comment – Carl Rogers and postmodernism: continuing the conversation

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This paper continues the conversation about the relationship between Carl Rogers and postmodernism initiated by Harlene Anderson and taken up by Maryhelen Snyder. The view adopted here is that postmodernism is undertheorized and there is a need to unravel definitions and concepts which arise from a conflation of social constructionism, post-structuralism and Rogers' existential humanism. It is argued that person-centred principles lie at he heart of therapy and should neither be neglected nor taken for granted.

Carl Rogers and postmodernism: continuing the conversation

In a recent paper in this journal, Harlene Anderson (2001) examined the similarities and differences between Rogers and her own postmodern approach. An accompanying paper by myself (Bott, 2001) set out to redress the relative neglect of client-centred therapy, making a case for the relevance of the existential-humanistic position in relation to contemporary concerns about disrespectful practice. Subsequently, Maryhelen Snyder has responded with an account of her own work, at the same time identifying an important and regrettable omission in my review.

Anderson and Snyder state the intention of approaching this discussion in the spirit of opening up dialogue 'not as an academic debate to tear down or integrate' (Anderson, 2001: 339). To continue and extend the conversation, I plan to take a closer look at postmodernism and its implications for a person-centred or family-centred practice. Harlene Anderson leaves us with an intriguing question: 'I wonder what Rogers would say?' Maryhelen Snyder finds in Harlene Anderson's paper the view that, if Rogers were alive today, he would have taken a postmodern social constructionist

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direction. Again, echoing Harlene Anderson, my own position on this is: perhaps, but it is not as straightforward as all that.

In the same way that postmodernism has been defined by Lyotard, a leading post-structuralist, as an 'incredulity towards metanarratives', I reserve the right to maintain a position of incredulity towards the metanarrative that postmodernism has itself become. This is not for one moment to suggest that I do not recognize and value the considerable impact some of these ideas have had in humanizing family therapy practice. Equally, I appreciate the contribution of those who have formulated the 'user-friendly' approaches based upon them. However, put baldly, I think that one crucial set of ideas has been neglected or at best, as Anderson argues, 'taken for granted' and the implications of another have been misunderstood.

It is gratifying in itself that we are in the process of an open discussion about the relevance of Rogers in this journal. Harlene Anderson suggests that person-centred principles have become so embedded in our psychotherapy that they have become 'givens' and that most therapists 'aspire to be . . . similar to Rogers' therapist characteristics'(p. 538). Maryhelen Snyder, writing as a therapist with a deep understanding of Rogers' work, describes herself as falling 'in love' with postmodern thinking. We might conclude from these comments that there is no issue to discuss. We are all implicit Rogerians and a Rogerian practitioner embraces postmodernism. This might be the case if the deceptive simplicity and moral directness of Rogers' account of the therapeutic relationship were fully accounted for in postmodernism, and if postmodernism could be unequivocally embraced. My own view is that what has been called the postmodern turn in family therapy has in many ways been an existential-humanistic *return* under other colours which at the same time has incorporated important ideas concerning the centrality of language.

I share Best and Kellner's (1991) proposition that:

> The confusion involved in the discourse of the postmodern results from its usage in different fields and disciplines and the fact that most theorists and commentators on postmodern discourse provide definitions and concepts that are at odds with one another and are usually undertheorized.

I would maintain that postmodernism is undertheorized within family therapy and that there is a need to unravel definitions and concepts which arise from a conflation of American social constructionism,

French post-structuralism and an unacknowledged debt to Rogerian existential-humanism.

The principles of social constructionism are now widely disseminated within the field of family therapy and well understood. They date back to the work of G.H. Mead (1934), subsequently to be rediscovered in the 1960s and 1970s by social theorists like Goffman, Garfinkel and, most notably in our case, Berger and Luckman (1967). Recently there has been a resurgence of interest in these ideas to be found in the work of contemporary social constructionists like Gergen, Shotter and Parker. Social constructionist principles can be located in a tradition emanating from North America which values optimism, openness and pragmatism.

Post-structuralism is a very different matter and is subject to some confusion. Its French origins lie in a post 1968 attempt to challenge enlightenment principles in general and, specifically, the work of Hegel and Marx. The post-structuralists, in effect, turned their back on the grand but flawed enlightenment programme of humanity, progress and freedom in favour of a number of themes which are to be found within Nietzsche. These are: the rejection of a programme of cumulative and progressive historical change; the celebration of difference over conformity; the privileging of local and irrational knowledge over the universal and objective; moral relativism arising from a perspectivist approach ; and a fascination with the surfaces of things. There is much in the work of thinkers like Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and Baudrillard that is fascinating and healthily challenging to our enlightenment world taken for granted. At the same time I find aspects that are at odds with the beliefs and practices that inform helping others which, by contrast, look to a secular version of precisely the enlightenment Judaeo-Christian tradition which Nietzschean post-structuralism rejects.[1]

At the core of Rogers' approach is a firm ethical commitment to the notion of 'respect for persons' which follows from this tradition. I am not suggesting that practitioners who attach themselves to postmodernism are unethical. On the contrary, it is precisely those who were uncomfortable with what were perceived to be oppressive modernist practices who were initially drawn to these ideas. However, the ethical tradition which informs the practice of

[1] There is another voice to be heard here, and for a very different position on Lyotard see Louis Shawver (2000).

psychotherapy is at best implicit in social constructionism and is, by definition, absent from post-structuralism.

So, what would Rogers say? Of course, this is an impossible question, but we may assume that he would insist that certain core conditions should be present within the therapeutic encounter founded on a profound respect for the human individual. These are: an empathetic understanding of the other's experience; respect for their capacity to change; and congruence within the relationship. Further, these should neither be neglected nor taken for granted since these model the fundamental aspects of family life: love, honesty and respect for individual difference.

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