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Part II: Aspects of a Person-Centered Approach

Chapter 6: The Foundations of a Person-Centered Approach

(113) Cp. Rogers 1963; Rogers, The Formative Tendency, 1978; Jan Christian Smuts 1926; Alfred Adler 1933: „there can no longer be any doubt that everything we call a body shows a striving to become a whole.” (Adler 1993): “this holistic force ... was understood by these thinkers long ago.” (114) “The third basis for this paper comes from my reading of ... Fritjof Capra, a theoretical physicist; Magohah Murayama, a philosopher of science; and Ilya Prigogine, a chemist-philosopher.” This paper integrates these ideas “into the structure of a person-centered way of being.”

Characteristics of the Person-Centered Approach

This is „the primary theme of my whole professional life“ to which I have given „various labels“: “nondirective counselling, client-centered therapy, student-centered teaching, group-centered leadership.” (115) A complete statement on the “central hypothesis” is found in Rogers, 1959. A brief statement: “Individuals have within themselves vast resources for self-understanding and for altering their self-concepts, basic attitudes, and self-directed behavior; these resources can be tapped if a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided.” The “three conditions ... for a climate to be growth-promoting” (“between therapist and client, parent and child, leader and group, teacher and student, or administrator and staff” – “any situation in which the development of the person is a goal”): 1. “genuineness, realness, or congruence. The more the therapist is himself or herself in the relationship ... the greater is the likelihood that the client will change and grow in a constructive manner.”; “transparent to the client” so “the client can see right through what the therapist is in the relationship” and “experiences no holding back on the part of the therapist.”; what the therapist “is experiencing is available to awareness, can be lived in the relationship, and can be communicated, if appropriate.” (116) “there is a ... congruence, between what is being experienced at the gut level, what is present in awareness, and what is expressed to the client.”
2. “acceptance, or caring, or prizing” – “unconditional positive regard.”, “a positive, accepting attitude toward whatever the client is at that moment”, “in a total rather than a conditional way”. “The therapist is willing for the client to be whatever immediate feeling is going on – confusion, resentment, fear, anger, courage, love, or pride.”
3. “empathic understanding”: “the therapist senses accurately the feelings and personal meanings that the client is experiencing and communicates this understanding to the client. When functioning best, the therapist is so much inside the private world of the other that he or she can clarify not only the meanings of which the client is aware but even those just below the level of awareness. This kind of sensitive, active listening is exceedingly rare in our lives.”; to “listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know.”

“How does this climate ... bring about change?” “as persons are accepted and prized, they tend to develop a more caring attitude toward themselves. As persons are empathically heard, it becomes possible for them to listen more accurately to the flow of inner experiencings. But as a person (117) understands and prizes self, the self becomes more congruent with the experiencings. The person thus becomes more real, more genuine. These tendencies, the reciprocal of the therapist’s attitudes, enable the person to be a more effective growth-enhancer for himself or herself. There is a greater freedom to be the true, whole person (Rogers, 1962).”

Evidence Supporting the Person-Centered Approach

Much research “supports the view that when these facilitative conditions are present, changes in personality and behavior do indeed occur.” with “troubled individuals”, “schizophrenics”, with learning in schools, “of the improvement in other interpersonal relationships.” (e.g. Aspy 1972; Tausch 1978).
A Directional Process in Life

“the person-centered approach rests on a basic trust in human beings, and in all organisms.”

“there is in every organism ... an underlying flow of movement toward constructive fulfillment of its inherent possibilities”, (118) often termed the ‘actualizing tendency’. In flowers, trees, worms, birds, apes, persons, “life is an active process, not a passive one.” “whether the environment is favorable or unfavorable, the behaviors of an organism can be counted on to be in the direction of maintaining, enhancing, and reproducing itself. This is the very nature of the process we call life. This tendency is operative at all times. Indeed, only the presence or absence of this total directional process enables us to tell whether a given organism is alive or dead.”

“The actualizing tendency can ... be thwarted or warped, but it cannot be destroyed without destroying the organism.” “Life would not give up, even if it could not flourish.” Clients: (119) “So unfavorable have been the conditions in which these people have developed that their lives often seem abnormal, twisted, scarcely human. Yet, the directional tendency in them can be trusted. The clue to understanding their behavior is that they are striving, in the only ways that they perceive as available to them, to move toward growth, toward becoming. To healthy persons, the results may seem bizarre and futile, but they are life’s desperate attempt to become itself.”

Some Confirming Examples of the Directional Process


Support from biology: Hans Driesch’s work “with sea urchins”: (120) when the first two cells of the fertilized egg are separated, each of them “develops into a whole sea urchin larva”. In working with clients, groups, students, “I am most impressed ... that each human being has a directional tendency toward wholeness, toward actualization of his or her potentialities.” “I have not found psychotherapy or group experience effective when I have tried to create in another individual something that is not already there;” however, “if I can provide the conditions that allow growth to occur, then this positive directional tendency brings about constructive results.” When the sea urchin is provided good conditions, “the tendency for growth ... came from within the organism.” (121) This growth tendency does not involve “the development of all the potentialities of the organism”: “the organism does not tend toward developing its capacity for nausea, nor does it actualize its potentiality for self-destruction, nor its ability to bear pain. Only under unusual or perverse circumstances do these potentialities become actualized.” “the actualizing tendency is selective and directional – a constructive tendency, if you will.”

Support from Modern Theory and Experience

Cp. Pantony 1978 (unpublished); Murayama 1977. The ‘genetic code’ “does not contain all the information necessary to specify the characteristics of the mature organism. Instead, it contains a set of rules determining the interactions of the dividing cells.” “Thus information ... can grow” (Pentony, p. 9). (122) ‘Cause’ is not ‘followed in a one-way direction by an ‘effect.’ In contrast, ... there are mutual cause-effect interactions, which amplify deviations and permit new information and new forms to develop. This ‘morphogenetic epistemology’ appears to be basic to an understanding of all living systems, including all growth processes in organisms.” “Thus, there is great need to rethink the stimulus-response, cause-effect basis on which most of social science rests.”

Cp. “sensory deprivation” for “how strong is the organismic tendency to amplify diversities and create new information”. “tension reduction, or the absence of stimulation, is a far cry from being the desired state of the organism.”: “when deprived of external stimuli, the human organism produces a flood of internal stimuli” (123) “The individual most certainly does not lapse into homeostasis, into a passive equilibrium. This occurs only in diseased organisms.”

A Trustworthy Base

“the substratum of all motivation is the organismic tendency toward fulfillment. This tendency may express itself in the widest range of behaviors and in response to a wide variety of needs”. “Certain basic wants must be at least partially met before other needs become urgent. Consequently, the tendency of the organism to actualize itself may at one moment lead to the seeking of food or sexual satisfaction, and yet, unless these needs are overpoweringly great, even these satisfactions will be sought in ways that enhance, rather than diminish, self-esteem. And the organism will also seek other fulfillments in its transactions with the environment. The need for exploration of and producing change in the environment, the need for play and for self-exploration – all of these and many other behaviors are basically expressions of the actualizing tendency.” / “In short, organisms are always seeking, always initiating, always ‘up to something.’” “the tendency toward fulfillment, toward actualization, involving not only the maintenance but also the enhancement of the organism” is the “central source of energy in the human organism”, “a trustworthy function of the whole system rather than of some portion of it”.

(124) A Broader View: The Formative Tendency

Many regard this view “as too optimistic, not dealing adequately with the negative element, the evil, the dark side in human beings.” “Consequently, I would like to put this directional tendency in a broader context.”, drawing heavily on the works of “Albert Szent-Györgyi (1974), a Nobel Prize-winning biologist, and Lancelot Whyte (1974), a historian of ideas.”

“My main thesis is this: there appears to be a formative tendency at work in the universe, which can be observed at every level.” “Physical scientists up to now have focused primarily on ‘entropy,’ the tendency toward deterioration, or disorder”: “order tends to deteriorate into randomness”. “We are also very familiar with deterioration in organic life”, “of the death of the physical organism”. (125) “the world seems to be a great machine, running down and wearing out.”
“But there is far less recognition of, or emphasis on, the even more important formative tendency”, equally observable “at every level of the universe.” “every form that we see or know emerged from a simpler, less complex form.”, whether “inorganic of organic being.”: planets bein formed from a “whirlwind storm of particles”, “molecules of helium” from colliding “hydrogen nuclei”, then “heavier molecules ... followed by ... amino acids”, viruses, living organisms. “A creative, not a disintegrative process, is at work.” “Another fascinating example is the formation of crystals.”: (126) cells often form “more complex colonies” (coral reefs). Organisms “are not always successful in their ability to cope with the changing environment, but the trend toward complexity is always evident.” “Thus, without ignoring the tendency toward deterioration, we need to recognize fully what Szent-Györgyi terms ‘syntropy’ and what Whyte calls the ‘morphic tendency.’” “The universe is always building and creating as well as deteriorating. This process is evident in the human being, too.”

The Function of Consciousness in Human Beings

“What part does our awareness have in this formative function? I believe that consciousness has a small but (127) very important part. The ability to focus conscious attention seems to be one of the latest evolutionary developments in our species.” -- “a tiny peak of awareness, of symbolizing capacity, topping a vast pyramid of nonconscious organismic functioning.” “It is here that the reciprocal relationship between cause and effect is most demonstrably evident. It is here that choices are made, spontaneous forms created.”

“Some of my colleagues have said that organismic choice – the nonverbal, subconscious choice of way of being – is guided by the evolutionary flow. I agree; I will even go one step further. I would point out that in psychotherapy we have learned something about the psychological conditions that are most conducive to increasing this highly important self-awareness. With greater self-awareness, a more informed choice is possible, a choice more free from introjects, a conscious choice that is even more in tune with the evolutionary flow. Such a person is more potentially aware, not only of the stimuli from outside, but of ideas and dreams, and of the ongoing flow of feelings, emotions, and physiological reactions that he or she senses from within. The greater this awareness, the more surely the person (128) will float in a direction consonant with the directional evolutionary flow.”

“When a person is functioning in this way, it does not mean that there is a self-conscious awareness of all that is going on within, like the centipede whose movements were paralyzed when it became aware of each of its legs. On the contrary, such a person is free to live a feeling subjectively, as well as be aware of it. The individual might experience love, or pain, or fear, or just live in these experiences subjectively. Or, he or she might abstract self from this subjectivity and realize in awareness, ‘I am in pain;’ ‘I am afraid;’ ‘I do love.’ The crucial point is that when a person is functioning fully, there are no barriers, no inhibitions, which prevent the full experiencing of whatever is organismically present. This person is moving in the direction of wholeness, integration, a unified life. Consciousness is participating in this larger, creative, formative, tendency.”

Altered States of Consciousness

“But some go even further in their theories. Researchers such as Grof and Grof (1977) and Lilly (1973) believe that persons are able to advance beyond the ordinary level of consciousness. Their studies appear to reveal that in altered states of consciousness, persons feel they are in touch with, and grasp the meaning of, this evolutionary flow. They experience it as tending toward a transcending experience of unity. They picture the individual self as being dissolved in a whole area of higher values, especially beauty, harmony, and love. The person feels at one with the cosmos. Hard-headed research seems to be confirming the mystic’s experience of union with the universal.” (129) “For me, this point of view is confirmed by my more recent experience in working with clients, and especially in dealing with intensive groups.” “recently, my view has broadened into a new area which cannot as yet be studied empirically.” / “When I am at my best, as a group facilitator or as a therapist, ... I find that when I am closest to my inner, intuitive self, when I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me, when perhaps I am in a slightly altered state of consciousness, then whatever I do seems to be full of healing. Then, simply my presence is releasing and helpful to the other. ... when I can relax and be close to the transcendental core of me, then I may behave in strange and impulsive ways in the relationship, ways which I cannot justify rationally, which have nothing to do with my thought processes. But these strange behaviors turn out to be right, in some odd way: it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes a part of something larger. Profound growth and healing and energy are present.” / “This kind of transcendent phenomenon has certainly been experienced at times in groups in which I have worked, changing the lives of some of those involved. One participant in a workshop put it eloquently: ‘I found it to be a profound spiritual experience. I felt the oneness of spirit in the community. We breathed together, felt together, even spoke for one another. I felt the power of the “life force” that infuses each of us ... I felt its presence without the usual barricades of “me-ness” or “you-ness” – it was like a (130) meditative experience when I feel myself as a center of consciousness, very much a part of the broader, universal consciousness. And yet with that extraordinary sense of oneness, the separateness of each person present has never been more clearly preserved.’”

“Our experiences in therapy and in groups, it is clear, involve the transcendent, the indescribable, the spiritual. I am compelled to believe that I ... have underestimated the importance of this mystical, spiritual dimension.”

Science and the Mystical

“Here many readers, I am sure, will part company with me. What ... has become of logic, of science ...?” “I would like to adduce some surprising support for such views, from the most unexpected quarters.” / “Fritjof Capra (1975), a well-known theoretical physicist, has shown how present-day physics has almost completely abolished any solid concepts of our world, with the exception of energy.” “In modern physics the universe is thus experienced as a dynamic, inseparable whole which always includes the observer in an essential way. ... the traditional concepts of space and time, of isolated objects, and of cause and effect lose their meaning. Such an experience, however, is very similar to that of the Eastern mystics” (p.81). “He then goes on to point out
the astonishing parallels of Zen, Taoism, Buddhism, and other Oriental views. His own conviction is that physics and Eastern mysticism are separate (131) but complementary roads to the same knowledge.

Ilya Prigogine (Ferguson, 1979) “has developed mathematical formulas and proofs which demonstrate that the world of living nature is probabilistic, rather than solely deterministic.” “the more complex the structure ... the more energy it expands to maintain that complexity.” A complex system “is unstable, has fluctuations”; “As these fluctuations increase, they ... drive the system ... into a new, altered state, more ordered and coherent than before.” “The transformation from one state to another is a sudden shift, a nonlinear event”. Cp. Don (1977-1978): (132) “When a hitherto repressed feeling is fully and acceptantly experienced in awareness during the therapeutic relationship, there is not only a definitely felt psychological shift, but also a concomitant physiological change, as a new state of insight is achieved.”

“Prigogine’s theory appears to shed light on meditation, relaxation techniques, and altered states of consciousness, in which fluctuations are augmented by various means. It gives support to the value of fully recognizing and expressing one’s feelings – positive or negative – thus permitting the full perturbation of the system.”

“Thus, from theoretical physics and chemistry comes some confirmation of the validity of experiences that are transcendent, indescribable, unexpected, transformational”

A Hypothesis for the Future

... (133) A broad, very tentative hypothesis: “I hypothesize that there is a formative directional tendency in the universe, which can be traced and observed in stellar space, in crystals, in microorganisms, in more complex organic life, and in human beings. This is an evolutionary tendency toward greater order, greater complexity, greater interrelatedness. In humankind, this tendency exhibits itself as the individual moves from a single-cell origin to complex organic functioning, to knowing and sensing below the level of consciousness, to a conscious awareness of the organism and the external world, to a transcendent awareness of the harmony and unity of the cosmic system, including humankind.” This hypothesis “definitely forms a base for the person-centered approach.”

Conclusions

“in our work as person-centered therapists and facilitators, we have discovered the attitudinal qualities that are demonstrably effective in releasing constructive and growthful changes in the personality and behavior of individuals. Persons in an environment infused with these attitudes develop more self-understanding, more self-confidence, more ability to choose their behaviors. They learn more significantly, they have more freedom to be and become.” (134) “The individual in this nurturing climate is free to choose any direction, but actually selects positive and constructive ways.” This actualizing tendency is evident at all levels of our universe. “Thus, when we provide a psychological climate that permits persons to be ... We are tapping into a tendency which permeates all of organic life – a tendency to become all the complexity of which the organism is capable.” “we are tuning in to a potent creative tendency which has formed our universe, from the smallest snowflake to the largest galaxy”. “And perhaps we are touching the cutting edge of our ability to transcend ourselves, to create new and more spiritual directions in human evolution.” This “is, for me, a philosophical base for a person-centered approach. It justifies me in engaging in a life-affirming way of being.”

References:

... (135)


(136)


Chapter 7: Empathic: An Unappreciated Way of Being

(137) “We should re-examine and re-evaluate that very special way of being with another person which has been called ‘empathic.’” It is “extremely important both for the understanding of per-
sonality dynamics and for effecting changes in personality and behavior. It is one of the most
delicate and powerful ways we have of using ourselves.” It is “rarely seen in full bloom in a
relationship.”

Personal Vacillations
“Very early … I discovered that simply listening to my client, very attentively, was an important
way of being helpful.” “It seemed surprising to me that such a passive kind of interaction could
be so useful.” “A little later a social worker … helped me to learn that the most (138) effective
approach was to listen for the feelings, the emotions, whose patterns could be discerned through
the client’s words.”, and “the best response was to ‘reflect’ these feelings back to the client”. At
Ohio State University, “I cannot exaggerate the excitement of our learnings as we clustered about
the machine that enabled us to listen to ourselves”. “(I still regard this as the one best way of
learning to improve oneself as a therapist.)” We realized “that listening to feelings and ‘reflecting’
them was a vastly complex process.” “It became quite natural to lay more stress upon the
content of the therapist’s response than upon the empathic quality of the listening.” “we became
heavily conscious of the techniques that the counselor or therapist was using” but (139) the ap-
paling consequence was that “The whole approach came, in a few years, to be known as a tech-
nique.” (of reflecting the … so shocked by these complete distortions ... that for a number of years I said almost nothing about empathic listening”

The Current Need
However it became clear that “a high degree of empathy in a relationship is possibly the most
potent factor in bringing about change and learning.” In the US, part of the appeal of most ap-
proaches to therapy of the past 10-20 years such as “Gestalt therapy, psychodrama, primal ther-
apy, bioenergetics, rational-emotive therapy, and transactional analysis” “lies in the fact that in
most instances, the therapist is clearly the expert” (140) Meanwhile, however, “I have seen a will-
ingness on the part of many to take another look at ways of being with people that locate power
in the person, not the expert”.

Early Definitions
The definition in Rogers, 1959: “The state of empathy, or being empathic, is to perceive the inter-
nal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and mean-
ings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the “as if” condition.
Thus it means to sense the hurt or the pleasure of another as he senses it and to perceive the
causes thereof as he perceives them, but without ever losing the (141) recognition that it is as if I
were hurt or pleased and so forth. If this ‘as if’ quality is lost, then the state is one of identifica-
tion.’ (pp. 210-211).

Experiencing as a Useful Construct
“In formulating my current description, I have drawn on the concept of ‘experiencing’ as formu-
lated by Gendlin (1962).” In his view, “at all times there is going on in the human organism a
flow of experiences to which the individual can turn again and again as a referent in order to
discover the meaning of those experiences. An empathic therapist points sensitively to the ‘felt
meaning’ which the client is experiencing in this particular moment, in order to help him or her to
focus on that meaning and carry it further to its full and uninhibited experiencing.”

“A man in an encounter group has been making vaguely negative statements about his father.”
The therapist asks him, if is might be angry at his father – no – or possibly dissatisfied – no – or
disappointed – ‘that’s it!’. “Against what is the man checking these terms for their correctness?”
“he is checking them against the ongoing psycho-physiological flow within himself to see if
they fit. This flow is a very real thing, and people are able to use it as (142) a referent.” The term
‘disappointed’ in the example matches the felt meaning “exactly, and encourages a further flow of
the experiencing, as often happens.”

A Current Definition
Today, I believe empathy “to be a process, rather than a state.”. “An empathic way of being with
another person has several facets. It means entering the private perceptual world of the other and
becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment by moment, to the chang-
ing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or
whatever that he or she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in the other’s life, moving
about in it delicately without making judgments; it means sensing meanings of which he or she is
scarcely aware, but not trying to uncover totally unconscious feelings, since this would be too
threatening. It includes communicating your sensings of the person’s world as you look with
fresh and unfrightened eyes at elements of which he or she is fearful. If means frequently check-
ing with the person as to the accuracy of your sensings, and being guided by the responses you
receive. You are a confident companion to the person in his or her inner world. By pointing to
the possible meanings in the flow of another person’s experiencing, you help the other to focus
on this useful type of referent, to experience the meanings more fully, and to move forward in the
experiencing.” (143) “for the time being, you lay aside your own views and values in order to
enter another’s world without prejudice. In some sense it means that you lay aside your self; this
can only be done by persons who are secure enough in themselves that they know they will not
get lost in what may turn out to be the strange or bizarre world of the other, and that they can
comfortably return to their own world when they wish.”

“being empathic is a complex, demanding, and strong – yet also a subtle and gentle – way of be-
ing.”

Operational Definitions
“The foregoing description is hardly an operation definition, suitable for use in research.” Barrett-Lennard (1962) defines: ‘Qualitatively it (empathic [sic! = dt. ‘betonend,’ aber ≠ dt. ‘einfühlksam, empathisch’) understanding) is an active process of desiring to know the full, present and changing awareness of another person, of reaching out to receive his (144) communication and meaning, and of translating his words and signs into experienced meaning that matches at least those aspects of his awareness that are most important to him at the moment. It is an experiencing of the consciousness ‘behind’ another’s outward communication, but with continuous awareness that this consciousness is originating and proceeding in the other.” Cp. also the ‘Accurate Empathy Scale’ by Truax (1967). Stage 8: ‘... He [the therapist] moves into feelings and experiences that are only hinted at by the client and does so with sensitivity and accuracy. The content that comes to life may be new but is not alien. (145) ... The therapist reflects a togetherness with the [client] in tentative trial and error exploration.’ (p. 566)

A Definition for Contemporary Persons

‘Absolute Listening’ according to Gendlin & Hendricks, undated: ‘... You never mix into it any of your own ideas or opinions, never lay on the other person anything that person didn’t express. ... [reflecting] might be in your own words, usually, but use that person’s own words for the touchy main things.’ (146)

General Research Findings

- “The ideal therapist is, first of all, empathic.” – “psychotherapists of many different orientations” highly agree on this. (cp. Raskin 1974; Fiedler 1950b). “therapists recognize that the most important factor in being a therapist is ‘trying, as sensitively and as accurately as [one] can, to understand the client, from the latter’s own point of view’ (Raskin, 1974).”

- “Empathy is correlated with self-exploration and process movement.” (147) “Such a climate is definitely related to a high degree of self-exploration in the client”.

- “Empathy early in the relationship predicts later success.”, “by the fifth or even the second interview.”, later (lack of) success can be predicted (Tausch, 1973).

- “In successful cases, the client comes to perceive more empathy.” “although the increase is not very great”.

- “Empathic understanding is provided freely by the therapist, not drawn from him or her.”, it is “offered by the therapist” (Tausch et al., 1970), as evidence shows, not drawn from him by “an appealing or seducing client”. “So, if an empathic climate exists in a relationship, the probability is high that the therapist is responsible for it.”

- (148) “The more experienced the therapist is, the more likely he or she is to be empathic.”

The Consequences of an Empathic Climate

“Empathy is clearly related to positive outcome.” In schizophrenic patients, pupils, clients, teachers, neurotics, “the evidence is the same”: “the more sensitively understanding is the (151) therapist or teacher, the more likely are constructive learning and change to take place”. “far too little attention has been given these findings.”

1. “First, empathy dissolves alienation.”, “the recipient finds himself or herself a connected part of the human race.”, even having talked about hidden, strange, possibly abnormal things that the client has never communicated to another, not even clearly to himself.” ... And yet, another person has understood ... my feelings even more clearly than I do. If someone else knows what I am talking about, what I mean, then to this degree I am not so strange, or alien, or set apart. I make sense to another human being ... I am no longer an isolate.” This e.g. results in “the sharpest reduction in schizophrenic pathology”. (152) “Carl Jung has said that schizophrrenics cease to be schizophrenic when they meet other persons by whom they feel understood.” Similarly, “a low level of empathy is related to a slight worsening in adjustment and pathology.”: “If no one understands me ... then I am indeed ... more abnormal than I thought.”
2. Secondly, empathic understanding makes the recipient feel “valued, cared for, accepted as the person that he or she is.” “It is impossible to accurately sense the perceptual world of another person unless you value that person and his or her world – unless you, in some sense, care. Hence, the message comes through to the recipient that ‘this other individual trusts me, thinks I’m worthwhile. Perhaps I (153) am worth something. Perhaps I could value myself. Perhaps I could care for myself.’” “Client: ... Is it possible that I can really want to take care of myself, and make that a major purpose of my life?” “It is, I believe, the therapist’s caring understanding ... which has permitted this client to experience a high regard, even a love, for himself.”

3. “a third impact of a sensitive understanding comes from its nonjudgmental quality. The highest expression of empathy is accepting and nonjudgmental.” (154) “This is true because it is impossible to be accurately perceptive of another’s inner world if you have formed an evaluative opinion of that person. If you doubt this statement, choose someone you know with whom you deeply disagree and who is, in your judgment, definitely wrong or mistaken. Now try to state that individual’s views, beliefs, and feelings so accurately that he or she will agree that you have sensitively and correctly described his or her stance. I predict that nine times out of ten you will fail, because your judgment of the person’s view creeps into your description of them.” “Consequently, true empathy is always free of any evaluative or diagnostic quality. The recipient perceives this with some surprise: ‘If I am not being judged, perhaps I am not so evil or abnormal as I have thought. Perhaps I don’t have to judge myself so harshly.’ Thus, the possibility of self-acceptance is gradually increased.”

A psychologist interviewed students about visual perception – wearing glasses etc. – listening with interest, not making judgments “To his amazement, a number of these students returned spontaneously to thank him for all the help he had given them. He had, in his opinion, given them no help at all. But it forced him to recognize that interested nonjudgmental listening is a potent therapeutic force, even when directed at a narrow sector of life, and with no intent of being helpful.” – “a finely tuned understanding by (155) another individual gives the recipient a sense of personhood, of identity. Laing (1965) has said that ‘the sense of identity requires the existence of another by whom one is known’ (p.139). Buber has also spoken of the need to have our existence confirmed by another. Empathy gives that needed confirmation that one does exist as a separate, valued person with an identity.”

When persons feel understood, they “begin revealing material that they have never communicated before, in the process discovering previously unknown elements in themselves.” “To perceive a new aspect of oneself is the first step toward changing the concept of oneself. The new element is, in an understanding atmosphere, owned and assimilated into a now altered self-concept. This is the basis, in my estimation, of the behavior changes that can come about as a result of psychotherapy. Once the self-concept changes, behavior changes to match the freshly perceived self.”

Empathy is as well effective in the classroom, improving learning. (156)

Another effect of empathy as “to do with the dynamics of personality.” “When persons are perceptively understood, they find themselves coming in closer touch with a wider range of their experiencing. This gives them an expanded referent to which they can turn for guidance in understanding themselves and in directing their behavior. If the empathy has been accurate and deep, they may also be able to unblock a flow of experiencing and permit it to run its uninhibited course.” ::Example (157): “Here it is clear that empathic therapist responses encourage her in the wider exploration of, and closer (158) acquaintance with, the visceral experiencing going on within. She is learning to listen to her guts ... She has expanded her knowledge of the flow of her experiencing.” Again, “this unverbalized visceral flow is used as a referent. How does she know that ‘guilt’ is not the word to describe her feeling? She knows by turning within, taking another look at this reality, ... this experiencing. And so she can test the word ‘hurt’ against this referent, and she finds it closer.” She “has also learned something about this process of checking with her total physiological being – a learning she can apply again and again. And empathy has helped to make it possible.”

Also, her feeling is not new, “yet it has never been lived out. It has been blocked”. “It seems to me that only when a gut-level experience is fully accepted and accurately labeled in awareness can it be completed. Then the person can be moved beyond it.”

(159) Conclusions

“when persons find themselves sensitively and accurately understood, they develop a set of growth-promoting or therapeutic attitudes toward themselves.”:

1. “The non evaluative and acceptable quality ... enables persons ... to take a prizing, caring attitude toward themselves.”

2. “Being listened to by someone who understands makes it possible for persons to listen more accurately to themselves, with greater empathy toward ... their own vaguely felt meanings.”

3. “The individuals’ greater understanding of and prizing of themselves opens to them new facets of experience which become part of a more accurately based self-concept.”

“The self is now more congruent with the experiencing. Thus, the persons have become, in their attitudes toward themselves, more caring and accepting, more empathic and understanding, more real and congruent. But these three elements are ... the attitudes of an effective therapist. So ... an empathic [sic! = dt. ‘betontend’, aber ≠ dt. ‘einfühlksam, empathisch’] understanding by another enables a person to become a more effective growth enhancer, a more effective therapist, for himself or herself.”

“Consequently, whether we are functioning as therapists, as encounter-group facilitators, as teachers, or as parents, we have in our hands ...(160) ... a powerful force for change and growth.”

Along with empathy, the other factors for growthful relationships are:

congruence: “In ordinary interactions of life – between marital and sex partners, between teacher and student, employer and employee, or between colleagues or friends – congruence is probably the most important element. Congruence, or genuineness, involves letting the other person know
‘where you are’ emotionally. It may involve confrontation and the straightforward expression of personally owned feelings – both negative and positive.”

“But in certain other special situations, caring, or prizing, may turn out to be the most significant element.”, including “nonverbal relationship – between parent and infant, therapist and mute psychotic, physician and very ill patient. Caring is an attitude that is known to foster creativity”.

Then in “other situations”, “the empathic way of being has the highest priority. When the other person is hurting, confused, troubled, anxious, alienated, terrified, or when he or she is doubtful of self-worth, uncertain as to identity – then understanding is called for. The gentle and sensitive companionship ... (161) ... provides illumination and healing.”

References


