PERSON-CENTRED THERAPY TODAY

New Frontiers in Theory and Practice

DAVE MEARNS
AND BRIAN THORNE

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With guest chapters by Elke Lambers and
Margaret Warner

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Elke, Kirsty and Tessa – dear wife and daughters for Dave and for Brian an unfailing source of friendship and welcoming acceptance.

Contents

Preface

Since we first co-authored *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* (Sage, 1988, 1999) the world of counselling and psychotherapy has seen many changes. Not least it has become altogether more 'professional' with increasing emphasis on standards, accountability and ethical responsibility. In many ways we welcome these developments and have often been instrumental in their evolution. Indeed, we care so profoundly about the work we do that we will go to inordinate lengths in order to ensure that our clients receive the best possible companionship in the often perilous journeys which they undertake. Our 'guest' contributors, Elke Lambers and Margaret Warner, further reinforce this commitment to companionship of the highest quality in their chapters on supervision (Chapter 10) and on fragile and dissociated processes (Chapter 8). We are most grateful to them for responding so readily to our invitation and for providing such powerful evidence of what it means to be working responsibly but courageously at the very frontiers of the approach.

This present book is in some ways a celebration of all that has been achieved in the last decade or so. While person-centred therapy is in sad decline in its country of origin, there has been an astonishing growth both in Britain and many other European countries (see Thorne and Lambers, 1998). The fact that our own previous book has sold more copies than any other counselling text in Britain is perhaps an indication of the development and the popularity of the approach and there are many occasions when we are both humbled and amazed by the sales figures. This new book, however, is not prompted primarily by feelings of celebration and satisfaction. On the contrary, as the new millennium begins, we are apprehensive about the future and are baffled by the misconceptions which still abound about the theory and practice of person-centred therapy. We ask ourselves how it can be, for example, that despite the growing and impressive body of literature about the approach, despite the almost universal respect

in which its originator, Carl Rogers, is held, despite the existence of countless person-centred therapists and their clients, there still exists the denigratory and scurrilous myth that person-centred therapists merely nod, reflect the last words of their client and can only be trusted with the most superficial concerns of middle-class clients. We have concluded that such misconceptions are not always the outcome of ignorance but in some cases, at least, have much deeper roots. It would seem that our approach has the strange capacity to threaten practitioners from other orientations so that they seek refuge in wilful ignorance or in condemnatory dismissiveness.

This book attempts to address this confusing state of affairs. By placing overriding emphasis on the person-centred therapist's capacity for relational depth (Chapter 5) and by exploring the implications of this for theory and practice as well as for the spiritual/existential discipline of the therapist (Chapter 3), we state clearly and unequivocally our belief in the power, profundity and subtle elegance of the approach. What is more, we place it in the context of a world which is struggling with unparalleled challenges brought about by ecological disaster, technological advances and cross-cultural conflict (Chapter 1). It seems to us that a therapeutic approach which does not take on board the reality of the knife-edge on which the world currently finds itself must inevitably warrant the accusation of fiddling while Rome burns. Both we and our clients are citizens of a global community which is poised between hope and despair and this is the back-drop against which the psychic dramas in the therapist's consulting room are played out. To evade or ignore that reality is to collude with the forces which resist awareness and refuse responsibility.

As its title conveys, this book marks 'new frontiers in theory and practice'. It updates theory on the therapeutic conditions (Chapter 5) and introduces the new person-centred theory of 'configurations' (Chapters 6 and 7). In Chapter 8, Margaret Warner offers a full statement of the theory and practice of working with 'fragile' and 'dissociated' process while, in Chapter 10, Elke Lambers takes the theory and practice of supervision forward by grounding it in the development of the counsellor's congruence. Arguably, the most important contribution to theory is presented in Chapter 9 where Rogers' theory of the Self is revised.

Person-centred therapy is not, we believe, set in tablets of stone either as a theoretical system or as an applied practice. We attempt in this book both to develop the theory and to refine the practice of an approach to human suffering and human potential which we believe has much to offer as we enter the new millennium. We are not, however, under any illusion that the task will be an easy one. In some ways the core of person-centred therapy can be summed up in the words 'it pays to be human in the therapy room'. And there lies the nub of the challenge which confronts us. Being fully human in any situation is not only an existential task of formidable proportions, it may be a costly one in terms of personal investment and personal risk (Chapters 1, 2 and 11).

The rewards, however, are incomparable because to take the risk of being fully human today brings with it the promise of a vibrant tomorrow. This book is written in the belief that real hope lies beyond despair and that this is the hope on which person-centred therapy is founded and by which it is sustained and nourished.

Professor Dave Mearns
Professor Brian Thorne

Guest Contributors

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Acknowledgement

1   Towards an inhuman society?

A costly commitment

This book begins in hope. Hope, it should be understood, is not to be confused with a facile optimism, for often we do not feel particularly optimistic about our profession or about the society of which we are members. Hope, as we understand it, finds its anchorage in the unquenchable yearning of the human person who has touched the core of his or her own nature and has glimpsed, if only for a moment, the glory of being fully alive. We have had many such glimpses and refuse to deny what we know from experience even when others would have us believe that we are deluded or, worse still, when we ourselves harbour massive doubts and are tempted to settle for a quiet life of academic indifference. Hope, thus conceived, makes it possible to envisage, with Theodore Zeldin, the end of 'the wasteful war between optimists and pessimists' (Zeldin, 1998: 79–80). We are, we believe, at a crucial point in the evolution of humankind and we need a vision which takes full account of the data and at the same time maintains the spirit of adventure while not being discouraged by inevitable failures.

Such a vision is buttressed by our daily experience as person-centred therapists and trainers of meeting with those who courageously refuse to accept the distortion of their identity by societal, cultural or familial forces. It would seem that such people are inspired and supported by an instinctive recognition that they are part of a worldwide company of those who are no longer willing to submit meekly to the power of others but rather affirm their right to a full humanity and to a quality of interpersonal living which does justice to the human person's capacity for intimacy and mutuality. What is more, the opening up of communication networks throughout the globe is enabling individuals to find like-minded spirits beyond their own limited spheres and to discover reference points outside their own environment. There

can be no doubt, too, that the courageous struggles of women and many minority groups during the final decades of the twentieth century have brought into the mainstream consciousness of Western democracies the vision of gender and racial equality. There are fresh winds blowing through our culture which seem to herald a new dispensation where the individual is honoured and relationships between people can attain a vibrancy and a depth which were previously reserved for the exceptional few.

Notwithstanding the potency of this vision, however, we also experience sadness because this same society which has within it the seeds of a new order seems in other ways to be increasingly bent on creating an environment which is conducive to the destruction of persons rather than to their fulfilment, to the fracturing of community rather than to its enhancement. Many of our clients have fallen victim to the uncontrollable pressures of a society in transition where change is often so rapid and bewildering that the individual can no longer find a sure reference point and where the escalating demands for enhanced performance both at work and in the home engender feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness or induce degrees of mental, emotional and physical exhaustion which ultimately become insupportable. What is more, among the ranks of the therapists there are those – and we count ourselves among them – who view with deep misgiving signs of the apparent capitulation of the emerging profession of counselling and psychotherapy itself to the darker side of the current zeitgeist (Gladstone, 1997; House, 1996; House and Totton, 1997; Mearns, 1999; Mowbray, 1995; Smail, 1997; Thorne, 1997). The legitimate but often obsessional concern for higher standards, public accountability and cost-effective results is increasingly forcing many therapists to adopt attitudes or to pursue objectives which are radically at variance with their core values and beliefs. Such 'contamination' can be seen in the life of the professional associations which seem at times to be more concerned to win the approval of Government, or to mollify an accusatory press, than to serve the best interests of clients and remain true to the priceless repository of knowledge and practice which decades of therapeutic endeavour have created. This book is written in the belief that surrender to contemporary obsessions can be halted and that a recovery of nerve is vital to the future of counselling and psychotherapy in our country. We are also bold enough to believe that the person-centred tradition has a significant contribution to make at a time when sterile surveillance

and a preoccupation with risk limitation are threatening to under-mine the liberating transformation which therapy at its best can engender in the lives of both individuals and communities. We are not so naive, however, as to imagine that this will be an easy task. On the contrary, it seems increasingly possible that align-ment with the theory and practice of person-centred therapy may be costly in terms of personal commitment and professional credibility.

A ravaged world

The appalling genocidal conflicts which have been played out in the closing years of the twentieth century make the writing of books seem oddly futile and yet therapists claim to respond to the deepest pain of human experience. If, in the face of the horrors of Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Chechnya, we have noth-ing to say, it would suggest that the faith of counsellors is shallow indeed and that we are perhaps no more than psychological technicians who tinker away with occasional success at the neu-roses of the affluent. Perhaps, however, in a grim way, the seemingly endless tide of refugees in so many parts of the world prompts us to take stock of the human condition and to wake up to the forces which threaten humanity as the new millennium begins. For Europeans particularly, that awakening is encouraged by media coverage which depicts not only the emaciated bodies of African men, women and children, but also the humiliation and degradation of people dressed like ourselves who were once earning their livings as teachers, lawyers, engineers, journalists, waiters or factory workers. In our hearts we know that with a different twist of fate, we, too, could be in the ranks of the dispossessed, stripped of our identities and belonging nowhere. The refugee becomes a sinister symbol of what can quickly happen once personhood is denied and people are transformed into disposable units or contemptible impediments to the greed or power-mongering of others.

Threats to identity

It may seem melodramatic to perceive the genocidal violence of the last decade as in some way symbolic of a more general

sickness which permeates the global community. Indeed, many commentators have been tempted to see these nightmarish conflicts as a kind of throw-back to a previous era, an anachronistic aberration which is somehow contrary to the flow of history. Such a perception is hard to sustain. The ideologies of, for example, Adolf Hitler and the Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic, may appear very different but they have in common a denial of the right to personhood of millions of people. The removal of documentation, personal belongings, money, car number plates and so on communicates to desperate people that they have no right to identity, that they are henceforth non-persons with no place to call their own and no distinguishing mark to register their uniqueness. The experience for the luckless victims of such psychological viciousness – that is, if they escape with their lives – is one of complete depersonalisation. In an extreme form, however, they suffer what is increasingly the fate of many who eventually find their way to the therapist's door as the new century begins. For the person-centred practitioner there is the frequent encounter nowadays with those who have all but lost their hold on personhood and who experience themselves not as persons but as powerless pawns in a macabre game whose rules they cannot grasp or as refugees from a society which is 'cleansing' itself.

The 'new capitalism'

The work environment is notoriously the place where such loss of identity is seemingly endemic. It would appear that the new capitalism, with its brave new world of risk, flexibility, short-term project work and relentless competitiveness, is depriving many workers of any fixed reference points for stabilising their sense of who they are. It can be instructive to travel these days on an inter-city train in Britain. Whole carriages are sometimes taken up by men and women in suits who are glued to their laptops or mobile phones. The endless tapping and the raised, anxious voices typify a world where everything is on the move, where millions of pounds can be lost or gained in minutes and where the individual is rootless and caught up in a perpetual state of transition. Richard Sennett, the sociologist, describes in his book *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) the world of the multi-nationals where workers are continually being asked to re-invent themselves in the service of economic forces over which they have no control. In the preface

to his book, Sennett poses questions which have so far found no answers and yet they are fundamental to any enduring sense of identity:

> How do we decide what is of lasting value in ourselves in a society which is impatient, which focuses on the immediate moment? How can long-term goals be pursued in an economy devoted to the short term? How can mutual loyalties and commitments be sustained in institutions which are constantly breaking apart or continually being redesigned? (Sennett, 1998: 10)

This dramatic shift in working patterns and the predominance of short term objectives presents new challenges to often vulnerable and insecure people whose sense of identity is sometimes fragile in the extreme. Counsellors in the workplace are daily confronted by exhausted employees who only too readily blame themselves for their lack of resilience or their inability to survive in a context which seems to ignore their needs as human beings and treats them instead as machines devoid of feelings. The acknowledgement of vulnerability in such an environment can be difficult, for it brings with it the risk of being deemed weak, inadequate or dispensable. Authenticity (a prerequisite for mental health) becomes dangerous, and to trust others to be responsive, let alone empathic, can seem at best foolhardy and at worst psychologically lethal. The final tragedy occurs when the man or woman who has attempted at great personal cost to portray the all-coping behaviour of the infinitely flexible worker is peremptorily declared redundant because the bottom has fallen out of the market or a systems driven administration sees enhanced profits as dependent on the euphemistically termed process of 'downsizing'.

There can be no doubt that there are those who thrive in an environment whose very challenges contribute the material from which identity can be forged. For others, however, the personal sacrifices can be great. Expense account living may serve to mask the quiet desperation of highly paid 'leaders of industry' who inwardly mourn the loss of intimacy and bear the guilt of being the absent spouse or parent. Counsellors not infrequently share the pain of those whose work situations have led to a breakdown of family relationships and to a loss of emotional connectedness which leads to intolerable loneliness. Perhaps, however, such suffering is to be preferred to the limited vision of the dedicated worker who is apparently content to put career advancement and material gain above everything else or sees loss of spouse and family disintegration as a regrettable but inevitable price to be

paid. It is now almost possible to conceive of an individual who on his or her deathbed could truly regret that more hours had not been spent in the office. If it is accepted that the workplace for millions of people has changed irrevocably, the challenge becomes increasingly stark. How can human beings ensure that they do not lose their humanity in acquiescence to the profit-making demands of the rapacious multi-nationals which employ them?

The educational environment

The conflict between remaining recognisably human and meeting performance standards begins early now in many schools, for we are told that Britain's very survival as a strong competitor in the world's markets depends on her citizens attaining an ever higher level of educational achievement. Testing and constant surveillance seem increasingly to be the central planks of educational practice even at the primary stage, while the rigorously enforced national curriculum can threaten creativity, spontaneity and the relaxed social discourse between adult and child on which the developing person depends for affirmation and a sense of relatedness. There is little time for play and not infrequently the performing arts struggle to retain a foothold in the school curriculum against the pressing claims of literacy, numeracy, science and information technology. Academic achievement becomes the single measure of a school's effectiveness and league tables record the winners and the losers. It is now regarded as acceptable that such policies as 'naming and shaming' and 'zero tolerance' become part of the educational standard and that performance related pay should be seen as an appropriate reward for 'successful' teachers. The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) in England strikes fear in the hearts of teachers and it is no exaggeration to suggest that in some areas the trampling of the inspectors' feet conveys the same sense of impending doom as the sound of the sergeant major's boots mounting the barrack room steps (cf Thorne, 1998b: 29). It is fear which now often reigns in the staff rooms of our schools and in such a situation the irony of putting 'spirituality' on the agenda and attempting to evaluate it along with everything else can almost pass unnoticed.

Once again it is the counsellors who are 'privileged' to accompany those whose lives have been blighted by the implementation of policies which seem to focus on performance to the detriment

of persons. Teachers and pupils alike succumb to incapacitating stress and in the safety of the therapist's office they pour out their misery and not infrequently talk of suicide. It is an open secret that many teachers in recent years have left the profession in Britain with their physical and mental health impaired and often crippled by anxiety, a viral illness or a depressive state which makes their return to the classroom impossible. In the universities, too, counsellors attempt to stem a relentless tide of student clients, many of whom live permanently with the fear of failure – meaning for some anything less than a first class degree. For many of their teachers the situation is no better and there are university staff whose love of learning and teaching has been all but extinguished by the permanent need to attract research money, or by the threat of research or teaching quality assessment exercises. The surveillance mania is corrosive and now that students are no longer simply students, but part of a commercial empire, there is the additional threat of dissatisfied customers who are not slow to consult their lawyers. The educational world can become little more than a contractual jungle where blaming and shaming are activities which accurately reflect an ethos which is essentially punitive, judgemental, unforgiving and soulless. Many university vice-chancellors will privately acknowledge that universities are now in effect business enterprises and as with any other business 'the bottom line' is financial solvency. Downsizing, audit trails, customer satisfaction and cost-effective products are now the management-speak of the senior common-room – that is, where such a facility still exists.

There is, of course, another side to this story. It can be argued, with justification, that in the past some university academics have been content to rest on their laurels and have neither advanced the development of their discipline, nor attended conscientiously to the needs of their students. What is more, there are those who believe that a largely unaccountable university sector has consumed large sums of public money for the education of an intellectual and social elite. Clearly, as in so many other areas, change was inevitable and probably long overdue. Sadly, however, the opportunities which change should offer seem at the moment to be obscured by the devastating outcomes of a transition process. This process often runs out of control and leads to persons being forgotten in the interests of economy or in the frenzy to achieve so-called results. It need not be so.

Anxiety and technology

It is often observed that the rooms of isolated and alienated adolescents are full of the latest wonders of technology. Clearly we are in the midst of a period of transition as far as technology is concerned. Geoff Mulgan, Director of Demos, has suggested that we can now find an invisible line cutting through the middle of most western societies. 'On one side of this new line are the people brought up before computers became part of everyday life. On the other side are the generations for whom computers are becoming unexceptional' (Mulgan, 1997: 14). As in all transitions, the experience of fear and anxiety typifies much of the response to the new world of 'cybernetics', a term coined originally by the American scientist, Norbert Wiener, to define a systematic science which could be applied to almost everything from household devices to the management of schools, factories or battle campaigns. The fears and anxieties are so multifarious that they are impossible to codify. Underlying many of them is the wholly justifiable terror that what promises to offer human beings more control over their lives, more freedom, more options will, in fact, end up by exerting a new form of dictatorship. Far from *offering* more control, unfettered technology will increasingly *take* control of our lives, so that in the end we shall become more impotent, more a prey to forces which we are powerless to resist.

The consulting rooms of many therapists would suggest that the futuristic nightmare which some doom-mongers predict is not altogether impossible. There, the casualties of technological advance proliferate. Alongside those who have been made redundant in the wake of computerised systems, there are those whose lives are run by the insistent urgency of merciless machines which demand immediate action or provide such a mass of data that the human brain collapses under the weight of overload. There are those, too, who dread the e-mail which 'flames' them with little chance of redress, or those whose partners have 'fallen in love' on the internet and are amorously engaged with a screen in the study. Perhaps most sadly of all, there are the parents who lament that they have 'lost' their children to video games, television screens and 'surfing the net'. This new addiction can induce a psychological incarceration which cuts the victim off from normal human communication. Such gloom in the face of technological advance

may seem a very 'modernist' reaction and unworthy of intelligent thinkers in a postmodernist era which almost rejoices in the death of metanarratives and welcomes alternative, even contradictory, perspectives. For our part, we do not relish the prospect of being labelled as grumpy old curmudgeons who fret about the internet in the same way that our parents condemned television, or our grandparents fumed about the telephone or our great-grandparents ranted about the steam railway. Nor would such a labelling be justified, for we are fully aware that, as so often, there is another side to this story. Technological advance offers opportunities and provides new challenges. Nothing is achieved by saying 'no' to what is clearly here to stay and there can be little or no prospect of relating to the alienated adolescent if we simply condemn as 'wrong' the technological miracles by which he or she is enraptured.

We are not at all sure whether as person-centred therapists we have a stake in the question of whether we live in a postmodern time, for it could justifiably be claimed that we still remain faithful to a metanarrative even if that narrative insists on the uniqueness of subjective truth. For us, the debate about modernist or post-modernist perspectives can be as vapid and time-wasting as the diversionary conflict between optimists and pessimists. What is clear is that we cannot possibly know at this stage whether information technology will ultimately enhance our freedom or engender new forms of oppression. If, however, we value – as we do – the power of relationship to facilitate human development and if we believe – as we do – that much misery in the world is the result of the abuse of power, then there is much to be welcomed in the steady advance of computer technology. The challenge, as Theodore Zeldin has elegantly expressed it, is 'to develop a new tone' which at one and the same time is 'both hopeful and aware of the likelihood of failure' (Zeldin, 1998: 78). Such a tone will be strengthened and inspired by the fact that information technology makes life very difficult for totalitarian governments and gives infinitely more freedom to the handi-capped and the geographically isolated. It also offers new possi-bilities for preserving affectionate relationships through e-mail's creation of an entirely new kind of letter-writing culture. But it might all end in disastrous failure and we need to be able to cope with that possibility if we are to remain hopeful. To be blindly optimistic will simply lead to the kind of impotence which we experience currently in the face of the increasingly polluted,

traffic-jammed cities of the world which have resulted from the time-saving, freedom-enhancing motorcar. As person-centred therapists we set much store on remaining open to experience. Such openness demands a willingness to respond to new challenges while acknowledging and accepting that failure is often as likely as success. If that sounds like a philosophy of risk-taking we would not wish to refute such an interpretation.

Gender and race

If, as we suggest, it is progressively difficult to hold on to a sense of identity while belonging to a society which demands constant change, much will depend on locating firm reference points. In the past, gender and race offered such rallying points and we see many examples still of those who attempt to fall back on their sexual or national identity as a means of shoring up their fragile sense of self. Sadly, in an increasingly multicultural world, the resort to nationality as a means of affirming identity runs the likely risk of creating conflict rather than creating community. National groups can only offer solid anchorage if they not only tolerate but celebrate other national groups. Sadly, this is rarely the case and as a result, nationality frequently offers not so much identity, as a means of identifying the enemy.

   Finding identity in sexuality is also no easy solution in many western societies at the present time. Indeed, there has probably never been a period when establishing sexual identity has been more complex. The powerful impact of feminism and the enormous influx of women into the workplace have turned previous role stereotypes upside down and, among highly educated women especially, there is often an agonising conflict between career and family aspirations. For men, the situation is no better, for they no longer have by birthright the 'bread-winner' ticket on which to pin their identity and often have the added task of developing caring and empathic skills to fulfil new family roles and to respond to women who increasingly demand a higher level of 'emotional intelligence'. If we add to this the gay and lesbian revolution, the questioning of the marriage contract, the escalation of divorce rates, the perplexing range of sexual behaviours observable in our society and the reactionary opposition to all of these, it is scarcely surprising that, again, the consulting rooms of

therapists are besieged by those who struggle with issues of gender and sexuality of almost boundless complexity.

As well as the confusion around issues of sexual identity and behaviour this is also an area in which many are prone to leap to condemnatory judgement. This is typical of a culture where there is, as there has been throughout history, a need to find a scapegoat (Girard, 1996). Perhaps more than in the past, however, guilt and self-denigration have a field day because they are constantly reinforced by media attention and there is apparently no means of reversing the process. Despite the withering of the 'meta-narratives' of religious and philosophical moral systems it would seem that we still yearn for ourselves and others to be perfect and when manifestly we or they are not, there is nowhere we can take our wretchedness or our rage and have them understood and alleviated. We are left to stew in our own juice and often sink beneath the weight of self-recrimination or a lack of self-forgiveness.

Responding to the challenge: counselling in the workplace

One of us (Thorne) currently spends much of his professional life as the counsellor to the employees of one of the country's largest finance houses. There are few industries which have experienced such tumultuous change or upheaval in recent times. What is now one of the most competitive and pressurised work arenas was only a few years ago a haven for those who wanted a safe job where they could legitimately expect to stay until retirement age with little to disturb the generally placid tempo of life.

Keith was one such person who joined the company straight from school and had progressed up the career ladder satisfactorily enough until, to quote his own words 'the gale began to blow in 1992'. Since then, Keith had been struggling to retain his equilibrium in a world of growing unpredictability where everything can change within a week and where new technology or new legislation required that he acquire new skills and new knowledge on the hoof. When he first came to the company's counselling service, Keith was on the verge of collapse and about to resign. He was depressed and ashamed that he could no longer cope. He deemed himself a failure and could find no consolation in the fact that for thirty years he had been a perfectly satisfactory employee. He had