**Person-Centred Approach**

KIPROP ENOCK

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Jürgen Kriz

Abstract.

The person-centred approach (PCA) was and is strongly related to systems theory: The core theo-retical and explanatory principle –“actualizing tendency” –has been coined by the Gestalt psycho-logist Kurt Goldstein. Moreover, Rogers stressed in some late papers the relationship between his

conception and modern interdisciplinary systems theory.

Starting from this historical perspective, this chapter provides an introduction into some core con-cepts of systems theory. Because “self-actualization” means “die and become!” of some patterns, the

“necessary and sufficient conditions” of a supporting personal relationship are important.

The last part gives an outline of the “Person Centred Systems Theory” which focuses on the processes

on different levels of human’s life. While the PCA has very well developed person-to-person relation-

ships, it has neglected structural influences of culture, meaning or language and their intercom-nections. An integration of these aspects would be of value.

Keywords: systems theory, meaning, actualizing tendency, Gestalt psychology, person-

centred systems theory

1Systemic Roots in Rogers´ Thought

In the eyes of many psychotherapists and counsellors, the person-centred approach (PCA)is

identified mainly or even only with a practical approach of psychotherapy, originated and

developed by Carl Rogers out of carefully observing (including technical recording) and

analysing many sessions of counselling and therapy which he himself and others conducted.

One core of this practical part of the PCA is the therapeutic relationship, defined by the so-

called three conditions that must be present in order for a climate to be growth-promoting

(Rogers 1959). Undoubtedly,this understanding has not only conquered the field of psycho-

therapy and counseling but also of family-and school-conferences or leader training (Gordon

1970, 2001), nonviolent or collaborative communication in mediation and peacebuilding

(Rosenberg 2001) –both former students of Rogers –or constructive communication in

learning groups (Motschnig-Pitrik & Nykl 2009).

However, observations and other empirical data do not just order themselves but are struc-tured by explicit or tacit ideas, assumptions or hypotheses of the observer. Accordingly, an

explanatory principle in Rogers´s thought emerged parallel to the empirically based develop-ment of the therapeutic relationship in order to structure and understand the phenomena and

data in his practice and research. Rogers has been influenced by Otto Rank, a psychoanalyst,

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who attended lectures by Alfred Adler, through whom, in 1906, he was given entree into

Sigmund Freud´s little psychoanalytic circle of Vienna. Rank´s thought was nearer to that of

Adler than that of Freud. When Rogers (1980, p. 113) stresses that “Alfred Adler later (1933)

used Smut´s concept of the holistic tendency in support of his view that there can no longer

be any doubt that everything, we call a body shows a striving to become a whole,” this may

have been an early influence which shapedthe way Rogers was looking at the world and

empirical facts. A second influence came from Kurt Goldstein, a leading member of the

Berlin school of Gestalt psychology, who had to leave Germany due to the NAZI-Regime and

was clinical professor of Psychiatry at Columbia University, 1934-1940. In his book The

Organism (1939, German edition 1934) Goldstein introduced the term “self-actualization”

which became, more generalized as “actualizing tendency,” a core principle in Rogers

approach. Forty years later, in a fundamental essay entitled “Foundations of the person-

centered approach”, Rogers referred to this actualizing tendency as “the foundation block of

the person-centered approach” (Rogers 1980, p. 114).

Goldstein coined the term “self-actualization” in order to refer to the self-organizing process-

ses of an organism (because “self-organization” was not a common term at that time). In

contrast to the classical dichotomy of imposing order from outside or developing order just

from inside, Goldstein stressed the crucial point that self-actualization does not mean that the

organism is immune to the events and forces of the external world. Conversely, the structural

possibilities of the organism are brought into actualization through environmental changes

that act upon it . Therefore, for the organism, the environment is both a source of supplies and

disturbances. The expressions of that actualization are the performances of the organism.

Through them the organism can deal with the respective environmental demands and actual-

ize itself (Goldstein 1939, p. 111). And, therefore, the healthy organism is one “in which the

tendency towards self-actualization is acting from within, and overcomes the disturbance

arising from the clash with the world” (p. 305).

Goldstein’s notion of “self-actualization” represents an even more general principle which

was important for the classical Gestalt psychology and is important for modern interdisci-

plinary systems theory: The circular interaction between the macroscopic and the micro-

scopic level of processes and their dynamics –or in terms of Gestalt psychology: between the

whole (the Gestalt) and its parts. The paradigmatic example of a “Gestalt” is a melody, be-

cause a sequence of tones is perceived (whenever possible) as a melody. This is the bottom-up

dynamics of ordering. However, the top-down dynamics is equally important: The elements

(tones) do not simply disappear in the Gestalt, as was said in undifferentiated holistic ap-

proaches. In contrast, the constituent parts (tones) often obtain a new and specific meaning

within these orderings. In a melody, you find the phenomena of the root and the tonic key-

note, which gives this tone a particular meaning with in the melody that it would not have as

an isolated tone, i.e. without the top-down influence of the Gestalt.

The dynamic properties of a Gestalt and its dynamic adaptation in the actualization of

inherent possibilities to forces from the environment were an important aspect in Gestalt

psychology, in Goldstein´s organismic theory and in Rogers´ thought. In contrast to classical

principles, the order of a Gestalt does not need an external “organizer”. For example, the

environment of an organism does not impose order from outside by way of control or does

force the individual to behave in a manner that is foreign to his nature.

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2Systems Theory as a Structural Science

However, using Rogers´ words, this “confirmation” of the actualizing tendency as “the

foundation block of the person-centered approach” “from theoretical physics and chemistry”

that he welcomed as an interdisciplinary principle helping us to understand, structure and

refer to his personal experiences raised different reactions. Some PCA-therapists seem to fear

that, if the PCA refers to principles which are also discussed in the natural sciences, we might

fall into the pitfalls of present-day technological scientism, reductionism, materialism, and

objectivism. Compared to the masses of publications concerning practical aspects of a

growth-promoting relationship there are only a few contributions to deepen our understanding

of the actualizing tendency, for example, by Cornelius-White (2006, 2007) or by the concept

of co-actualization (Motschnig-Pitrik & Barrett-Lennard 2010).

In any case, according to Grant (2004), stressing that we base our “practice on (implicit)

ethical concepts and world-views” (p. 156), we should be aware of the roots of our everyday

understanding. Most people believe in the essential difference between repairing a defective

engine and working with a patient in a psychotherapeutic manner. But what are the concepts,

terms, metaphors and principles that we have and use as cognitive tools to grasp, explain and

discuss human development, pathogenesis or psychotherapy?

After 400 years of great success of classical mechanistic science as an essential basis of

today’s culture, our world is filled with machines, apparatus, tools, and “things” that have

changed the face of our planet. Over many generations, our inner images —the metaphors

and principles we use in understanding our everyday life —became, of course, more and

more related to the outer images of what we perceive and experience: things and mechanical

apparatus. No wonder then that it seemed self-evident to use these metaphors and principles

to understand and explain other areas of the “world”, too —when we are dealing with non-

human beings, with other humans, and last but not least with ourselves. This tendency seems

to be even stronger when we try to give rational or “scientific” explanations. Although

science has changed its world-view and its explanatory principles tremendously in the last

decades, the informal narratives and metaphors of culture do not adapt as quickly, but instead

still convey the “same old stories” of what “science” is. And this still involves the use of a

toolbox of mechanistic principles (which are indeed rather adequate in dealing with the

restricted apparatus of our technical world).

Conclusion

From this perspective, however, it seems that not all process-levels and their phenomena are

equally elaborated in PCA. On the intra-individual level, pattern formation and its develop-

mental and therapeutic needs with respect to a person-to-person relationship have been

extensively presented by Rogers. Additionally, the dynamics of psychic processes with regard

to the organism and body respectively became a central aspect particularly in Gendlin´s

focusing-approach.On the other side, stabilization and destabilization of inter-individual

patternsand their interwoven dynamics with processes on the psychic level are much better

conceived and formulated in systemic therapy and PCST. Moreover, while narratives, inter-

pretative patterns, principles of understanding and explanation, play an important role in

PCST, because they influence interpersonal and psychic patternsas well as the ability to

change these patterns a lot, all these aspects are nearly absent in PCA. The same is true for the

influence of language´s syntax, such as reification,wrong generalization etc. Generally speak-

ing, while Rogers stressed the aspectsof listening very carefully to the expressed feelings,

needs and contents in client´s verbal expressions he neglected the structural aspects of com-

munication, language and culture. PCST´s concern is, to build a bridge between both aspects

of human´s life.

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