

PCA or Not PCA...

That is the question...

by **Steve Vincent** (March 14th 1998)

In this address, I attempt to represent the views of many. Although having mused upon the apparently amazingly diverse views upon what is and what is not person-centred, I was prompted to begin writing by a letter sent to me, at BAPCA (the British Association for the Person-Centred Approach) by Professor **Dave Mearns** (from the Counselling Unit at the University of Strathclyde, dated 19th January 1998), in which the prospect of accreditation (or perhaps 'legitimation') through BAPCA is raised. I will then move into a cross-sample of views on what does and does not constitute a person-centred approach, and potential consequences in terms of membership inclusion and exclusion for person-centred associations.

Ethics:

I quote from the Dave Mearns letter with his permission. Many of the cross-section of views have been taken from the cctpca e-mail network. I thought that perhaps it was admissible for extracts to be attributed (on the grounds that by being on the Network contributions became public), yet the cctpca network is a *members* network. As I did not have the time to contact contributors individually, I have presented them (with the exception of my own and one other, with permission) in an anonymous way (although I do at times indicate the country of origin). It is perhaps worth commenting that several contributions were written by BAPCA members.

1. A Background: Complaints and Concerns

Dave Mearns wrote:

I am concerned and frustrated at the bad name which is attaching to person-centred practice in Britain. An example is the fact that complaints against "person-centred" members of BAC (British Association for Counselling) far outweigh those of any other discipline, even taking into account the fact that more people ascribe to the person-centred approach than any other core model. Particularly frustrating is the fact that when you scratch beneath the surface of these complaints you almost always find that the practitioner has virtually no training in the approach and certainly does not have training to the extent of the major courses whose graduates make up most of the membership of BAPCA.

A typical response to "*Why do you describe yourself as person-centred?*" is "*It just seems to describe the way I work*".

I think that part of the problem is that there is a fairly widespread misconception of the demands of person-centred working... The same problem about people representing themselves as "person-centred" is arising in some research studies. *The Lancet* paper in December did the person-centred specialism no good - I am trying to find out the nature of the training of the four "person-centred" therapists.

It is beginning to look as though they too fall into the category of people who haven't undergone formal training.

My wonder is whether BAPCA wants to consider taking a lead on the subject of accrediting the person-centred training of practitioners? The idea of accreditation may not sit well with a number of people in the specialism but if we don't consider that route then the approach may suffer the demise that has already happened in the USA and is currently threatened in Germany.

Included in my reply to Dave (11th February 1998, a fairly lengthy reply which I do not reproduce in full) were the comments:

I would want to be cautious about making any statements linking complaints and person-centred. My reason for this is that one factor behind a disproportionate number of complaints against 'person-centred' folk MAY be that clients feel less intimidated by a person-centred therapist! I know that I have encountered clients who related awful experiences, yet did not act upon them because they were, frankly, too intimidated by or scared of their (NON-person-centred) therapist! Another factor could be that person-centred folk are extremely good at letting clients know their rights! I stress that I am NOT in any way trying to oppose your concerns - far from it - I merely wish to be cautious...

I also wrote:

My belief is that a very significant factor... (although I have no 'concrete' evidence) might well be that many counselling SKILLS programmes define themselves as 'non-directive', and 'non-directive' seems very often to be linked with 'person-centred'. This leads me to wonder whether one way forward might be for BAPCA to put something together around differentiating between counselling SKILLS ('non-directive' or otherwise) and THERAPY, which could then maybe be sent to validating bodies, training providers, and so on?

Dave's response (12th February 1998) included:

I don't have any particular ideas on how it should be done, whether through Accreditation or Membership ... I know that the Scottish Association for Person-Centred Therapy dealt with this issue from the outset (which is probably easier than trying to change something which exists already). They only accept for membership individuals who are BAC Accredited or who have completed a BAC Accredited training course. Even members who are BAC Accredited must show convincing evidence that their substantial training has been person-centred...

... The only other category of membership they have is 'Associate Membership' which is only open to students engaged in Person-Centred BAC Accredited courses. In that way they have ensured from the outset a professional level of membership.

Even as I sit here typing this out again, I feel almost overwhelmed by the issues raised (and not for the first time)...

I wrote several pieces (mainly contributions to the cctpca network) in an attempt to provoke responses, and also linked in with other issues currently being debated within PCA networks.

Subsequent research suggests that issues such as these have concerned Dave Mearns and others for some time - in the Introduction to 'Person-Centred Counselling In Action' (Sage, 1988 - some ten years ago) Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne wrote:

... 'person-centred counselling'... began as a distinctive approach to counselling [and] has in the past 20 or so years extended its influence into many other fields including education, management, cross-cultural communication and international peace work. Rogers coined the term the 'person-centred approach' in order to do justice to this remarkable extension of his work, and as a way of describing a set of values, attitudes and behaviours when they were being employed in contexts far removed from the traditional one-to-one setting of a therapeutic interview.

It should not be imagined, that by opting for the term 'person-centred counselling' we are in any sense abandoning the discipline and rigour which characterised the first flourishing of client-centred counselling in America, when Rogers and his associates were widely acknowledged as in the vanguard of both practice and research. On the contrary, we are pleading for a return to such discipline, and are little short of horrified by the recent proliferation of counselling practitioners, both in America and in Britain, who seem to believe that by sticking the label person-centred on themselves they have licence to follow the most bizarre promptings of their own intuition or to create a veritable smorgasbord of therapeutic approaches which smack of eclecticism at its most irresponsible. Person-centred counselling as we practise it is 'traditional' in its emphasis on the full involvement of the counsellor in the relationship with the client. To us that 'old' foundation presents new challenges every day of our working lives.

As a possible contrast, Tony Merry conducted an e-mail interview published in the British Journal of Guidance and Counselling (Volume 25 Number 2, May 1997) in which the interviewee said:

I remember one discussion group... that has stayed in my mind and heart. A large group of person-centred folks (including Carl) were sitting in a circle. The topic turned to: 'Is it client-centred to do this, or client-centred to do that?' There were disagreements, and case examples focusing on the minutiae of what a therapist said or did, with criticisms of this or that wording or behaviour. My guts were tight, my breathing tense. I looked across the circle at Carl and his shoulders were slumped, his eyes focused on the floor. My unspoken thoughts were 'Is the person-centred approach going to self-destruct by nit-picking every word a therapist says and losing sight of the essence of the I-thou relationship? ... Are we focusing on the precise verbalisations while losing the vision of being in tune with the client? Do we really know how to be a companion with the client on her road to self-discovery?' I was angry and disappointed at the level of the discussion. Then Carl spoke. He heaved a big sigh and said: 'Boy, am I glad that when I discovered this process I didn't have to figure out "Is it client-centred or not?". I was really just looking to see what worked for the client.' My spirit rose and in my heart I said: 'Right on, dad!'

Complaints

Concerning complaints, a couple of other people stated that they too had heard of the disproportionate number of complaints made to BAC against 'person-centred' practitioners, although Dave Mearns strongly urged BAPCA against contacting BAC for statistics (I am not sure why). One cctpca contributor wrote:

I am an Assessor of Accreditation for BAC and I would say that people claiming to be PCA is the most common claim. As you will know, in this country it is very fashionable to claim to be PCA. By this most people mean they have heard of three core conditions. They see them as necessary, but all too often do not see them as sufficient. Many candidates talk about their person-centredness quite eloquently in their "philosophies"... When it comes to their case studies they talk about "interpreting", "learning", "guiding", "encouraging". ... It makes me angry.

When asked how many of these 'person-centred' practitioners become accredited:

A good percentage get through... The fact that you or I would say that this is not person-centred as we understand it is not a reason to fail them.

This, for me, raises the whole question around 'What IS person-centred?', and who has the authority to determine what person-centred is?

2. Person-Centred Approach?

I recall feeling a concern when proposing a 'two circles' BAPCA logo at an Executive meeting that one person seemed unaware of the significance of the 'Two Circles'... Does this mean that the person concerned was/is any less person-centred than I?

Some talk of three core conditions, some of four (including 'spirituality'), some of (the standard?) six, some of seven... How many versions are there? Is any one version 'truly' or 'more' PCA, meaning that the others are not?

I present some quotes (and extracts from quotes) from the cctpca network. There are many, even given the relatively short period over which I have collected them. If you are becoming bored, I can move on (the full range of quotes will be available for you in the manuscript of this address):

People I talk to say that "being nice" is person-centred. I can't say I am angry about it. Maybe just sad. (01/03/98)

The reason my reaction goes beyond 'sad' is that PC therapy involves others - notably clients. If it were simply a question of my own beliefs and others, I would unreservedly celebrate the differences. But when I hear people's outrage at 'person-centred' counselling, and conclude that the practice they have experienced is anything but person-centred (as Rogers communicated it), I have strong feelings. (03/03/98)

I have read with compassion reports from folks in countries... who say that the widespread meaning of "person-centred" is saddening to them...

... I don't personally feel interested in/I have NOT been interested in talking about what is person-centred. I learn [what is good] from my own experience and the experience of others I respect, not from what person-centred is. (02/03/98)

My view of PCA I learned with John Wood, who used to say that PCA is an approach to human relationships that means "a way of being" which involves a belief in the formative directional tendency, and some values, attitudes and abilities. I thought that "behind" the [core conditions] there are two more basic attitudes that I try to describe as "letting it be" and "being present". My anxiety is if we can build any conception for PCA - why should we to worry about conceptions and definitions? (02/03/98, Portugal)

Unfortunately, we have the same phenomenon in Brasil. A friend of mine has done research about client-centred therapy in Brasil. She asked several "person-centred" therapists how they described their work. Oh! I became so sad when I read it. They work in so many ways, that we cannot understand what is "really" client-centred or person-centred therapy. (02.03/98, Brasil)

I do not believe in the actualising tendency, but I am person-centred. (28/02/98)

I am client-centred because I want to be non-directive and the client-centred attitude gives me a good way to be non-directive. Being non-directive is an ethical decision on my part. It most definitely is not based on a belief in the actualising tendency. It is based in fact on my firm belief in the fallibility of all helpers, in particular, therapists. A belief in something perceived as positive is being held as a better incentive for the therapist than the rude scrutiny and distrust of a cynic. Trust in the client because the client will grow more and better himself or herself *versus* in a room with two dubious characters, I don't trust anyone, but in a world where all is in doubt, the best bet concerning the client is the client. I am tempted to suggest that my cynical premise is sounder than the more rosy outlook of a trust in the actualising tendency. It is possible that a cynical view of the universe is accepting of a wider array of client determinations. The bottom line for me is the ethics of the situation. I like psychotherapy. If I want to do it, there is in my view only one responsible approach. (15/02/98)

If client centred therapy is basically a useful way to frame being non-directive as a therapist then it begins to sound more like a technique to me... I myself have always been opposed to any technique as a therapist since I believe that this provides a sure wall of safety for the therapist and a resulting separation from the client's world. (15/02/98)

I felt it now very important to me that I declare and own the fundamental importance for me of the 'sufficient' clause. I too have been deeply frustrated and angered at those numerous counsellors around me who claim to be person-centred plus a little bit of this and a lot of that. I believe it does the profession no good at all and... I fear CCT is just not recognised as a particular specific discipline, which it is for me...

... Often I hear people describe the approach as a wishy-washy sentimental kind of relating, where for me it is rigorous, disciplined and certainly sufficient...

... I find I get cross when dialogues happen on our network which seem to stem from the lack of even a basic agreement that our approach is built on the foundations of Carl Rogers works, and that things like congruence cannot be accepted as having the same meaning and foundation for all of us. I am troubled by this, because for one thing if we cannot agree on such a fundamental level when we name ourselves in an approach, then what hope is there? Can we really expect CCT/PCA to be taken seriously?

... and since moving here I have sought far and wide to find a client-centred counsellor for myself, to help me through this slough of despond. I have had some dreadful experiences in my search, at times in disbelief at what is 'sold' as person-centred. (02/03/98, England)

If we can view the PCA through so many different angles and perspectives, is there something in common between all this views? I mean: is there something "real" which we can call PCA? If yes, what is it, so? (26/02/98)

The wonders of the approach to me is wrapped up in our diversity, our perspectives, and our shared positions. (27/02/98)

My experience in the UK is of people calling themselves 'Person-Centred' when they are, in my view, nothing of the kind. They seem to have read about the core conditions (often only three), decided that it's an easy approach and, thereafter, do pretty much as they choose. As a Person-Centred Counsellor, I feel that my own integrity is damaged by other people using the term to mean an eclectic mishmash with no coherent theory or philosophy. So I don't want Person- or Client-Centred to mean 'anything goes'. It is very important to me that PCC/CCT has a clear identity in the world - because it is, in part, my identity. (08/03/98)

How important it is to safeguard PCA - not in the sense of opening a museum, but to recognise on the one hand the 'roots' and all the work that has been done, and in addition that this approach does have boundaries but within that - 'we' - are living breathing dynamic people who can celebrate the differences and criticisms without feeling threatened... I feel proud to identify with this approach, like I do being a Jew, and do not want to dilute my beliefs until they become invisible or like some underground, illegal movement. Jews constantly argue over interpretations contained within our laws, although this is part of the process if you like, but there are also deep divisions within the communities, i.e. orthodox, reform, liberal etc, but I'd like to feel at the end of the day we are still Jews. (04/03/98)

I think there can be a combining of the purely client-determined character of these special purpose counselling experiences with pursuit of the special goals if the counsellor maintains the non-directive attitude and the clients are in the situation with a conscious choice to be getting help towards the specific goals involved...

... Most of the special counselling situations that I have heard about, however, are not person-centred (do not maintain the therapeutic attitudes nor the non-directive attitude) and are counsellor-directed emphasising the superior knowledge or wisdom of the counsellor over the client in relation to the client. (04/03/98)

I believe PCA can be seen as a set of skills. I see PCA from many angles. I am interested in using the skills to help me with relationships in general. I choose various skills depending on what my issue is. What objection do you have in calling PCA a set of skills? (24/02/98)

I suppose that, as this is 'my' address, I might give something of myself in addition to all these quotes. My reply to the above was:

You asked what the objection was to calling PCA a set of skills. The objection I have to people calling PCA a set of skills is that here in the UK people undertake counselling **SKILLS** training and then some choose to call themselves 'person-centred', when in my view most (or many) of these people are not 'therapists', and may generate complaints which reflect on those people who ARE PCA therapists...

In the UK, many SKILLS courses train people to reflect, to summarise, to paraphrase, to ask open-ended questions, and so on, and these skills are often labelled 'non-directive' and the person implementing such skills then calls themselves person-centred.

In my view, an open-ended question is an open-ended question - and it remains an open-ended question WHATEVER the approach of the person using the open-ended question.

My understanding of Carl Rogers is that he believed that the approach was quite definitely NOT about skills, or techniques - it was more about a WAY OF BEING and providing, as well as I am able, the necessary and sufficient core conditions. Carl wrote that he CRINGED when he heard 'reflecting' or 'reflecting feelings' used to describe alleged person-centredness...

I wonder if there is a difference between a skilful PCA practitioner (i.e. one who is skilled in being congruent and communicating the core conditions), and specifying what the skills are?

I hope that I am skilled at communicating empathic understanding and UPR in a way that is natural and authentic for me, yet I also believe (and hope) that your skilled way of doing so will be different to mine, and will be natural and authentic for you. This, for me, is qualitatively very different from saying I 'reflect', I 'paraphrase', I ask only 'open-ended questions' and so on. It feels a bit like such 'non-directive' skills generate a flow which the person implementing the skills goes along with ('go with the flow'), whereas the therapist understands more of the flow, is IN the flow, trusts in the flow, and so on...

So: For me, I guess that it is around differentiation, if you like: Differentiating between those implementing skills and those who are PCA therapists.

To continue with the extracts:

I think it is of fundamental importance that we can at least agree (or do I mean accept?) the foundations of our approach...

... I get frustrated when we end up with dialogue which seems to want to ignore or deny our foundation. (06/03/98)

... Descriptions of 'letting things unfold' and 'not getting in the way of the natural progression' do not chime with my own understanding of PCA. I was reading into it the kind of practice which uses a bit of TA here, a bit of Gestalt there, some relaxation techniques and the occasional psychodynamic interpretation - and calls it Person-Centred. There's also an interesting dynamic for me between acceptance and standards. What is my responsibility - our responsibility as a community - if someone abuses clients in the name of PCA? 'This client wanted sex with me. I was only going with the process'? Should I accept his (or her) version of PCA? (27/02/98)

I don't share the concern about the need for boundaries, nor am I concerned that we reach agreement about what pca is about. I want to encounter people's views even at the risk of being in disagreement with those views or having mine disliked. Differences in what is pca is not going to kill the approach, it will only serve to have us articulate our differing positions. You call for boundaries, yet I am one of those pushing on the boundaries. The approach has been around for some time before we came on the scene and will in all likelihood continue after we leave. Any approach worth its salt will survive, the rest fall by the wayside of mediocrity. The approach is growing around the world. I find your comments unfounded and sounding like an alarmist. In a lot ways the approach is indescribable to others. It is quite experiential and words often fail to capture its essence; further, the phenomenology of the approach lends itself very well to the divergent views that are expressed here, but which seem to be of great concern to you. *I have more concern that orthodoxy will do more damage to the approach than narrowly defined boundaries.* By the way, how long have you been studying pca? (02/03/98)

When we talk about PCA we are talking about (at least) two different kinds of "things": (1) PCA as a "theoretical" concept. By this angle, PCA is a solid "theory" which is based on some "premises" and scientific research. PCA, in this view, is a field of the science. So, it needs clear definitions (with no ambiguity, or the least possible ambiguities). This view of PCA is taught in the Universities. People write books and scientific articles using this conception of PCA. Most of what was written about this conception came from Rogers's written works. Rogers's ideas are seen as the core, the foundation of this PCA conception. (2) PCA as a community of people. Who does belong to this community? Are there some criteria for belonging to this? I suppose anyone who "wants to" can belong to it. The only criteria is "to want" to. *Anyone who wants to be "called" a PCA practitioner, can be.* Everybody is welcome. PCA community is large enough. People of PCA community don't make judgments, don't use labels, don't criticise, don't do valuations. It is a "UPRing" community. (24/02/98)

PCA is bigger than it seems and provides a basis for a wondrous variety of understandings and perceptions. (25/02/98)

Why in the world are we limiting the approach to the professions? (08/03/98)

Anyone who intends to call himself "Person-centred" can do it. My question is: Is there anything in common between all these people? Moreover, I noticed when someone says to another person: "You are not person-centred", this person (who said it) is considered "not person-centred" because there is some idea (in the culture of this community, not written, but known by everybody) that person-centredness means to accept everything, not make judgments and so on... When someone try to define, put boundaries on what is or what is not PCA, people protest. It means that PCA is EVERYTHING or NOTHING, it is the same... If PCA is everything or nothing, we would have to stay quiet, in silence. No words, no concepts, no thinkings, only the experience itself. I'm searching for a framework, for a reference, a centre from where all this diversity came. Am I alone in this searching? (28/02/98)

What alarms me slightly is the fervour with which such PCA beliefs are held as though they constitute an absolute belief - a truth that is self evident. We also seem to believe that whilst holding onto these very powerful values we at the same time are capable of not imposing them. I do not see how that is possible. It is also important that I can remain open to the possibility that the beliefs I hold dear to me may not be universally true or true for all time. (14/11/97)

It seems (to me) there are, at least, these PCAs: (1) Scientific approach (our statements must be proven); (2) Believers' approach. (we believe in Actualising/Formative Tendencies); (3) Ethical approach (we use this approach because it is close with our ethical values); (4) Non-theoretical approach (theory and concepts are less important.); (5) Eclectic approach (we use anything we think is good to use); (6) The "my" approach (I use my own approach); (7) Others (maybe some combination of the above). (24/02/98)

I see a need to establish a convivial foundational statement for the diverse values of the craft of PCA. According to Michael Polanyi a craft which is learned by apprenticeship and can only be passed on by apprenticeship will die out if some care is not taken to pass on the tradition. CCT/PCA is much more than a set of maxims which can be learned by rote...and the passing on of the tradition requires some sort of an apprenticeship. Paradoxically... while PCA encourages a greater reliance on a person's own authority... learning PCA is an apprenticeship requiring some level of acceptance of authority at least provisionally. In the process of developing and practising these implicit as well as explicit know-that and know-how - PCA connoisseurs have reshaped themselves. They have been reshaped by their knowledge... by the social process of their apprenticeship and by their craft activities and memberships. (24/02/98)

PCA: Ways of being in the world; Being in this network; Being in a PCA community; Being a therapist; Being a PC Supervisor and Trainer; Education (04/03/98)

I see the theoretical concept of PCA/CCT just the way you described it under 1). In that field I want to be clear and defining, I try to be as specific and sharp as possible. If you have to refrain from the core conditions for whatever good reasons I don't think you are THEORETICALLY person-centred. You may be very successful, helpful or person-centred IN ACTION. (23/02/98)

There have been recent exchanges on the cctpca network as to whether **congruence** should be freely communicated or not. One contributor wrote:

I do think there is reality outside of my perceptions. I do not think the meaning of congruence as a concept in Carl Rogers' theory is validly open to any interpretation. I think congruence in CCT theory means something and doesn't mean something else. I also think Rogers' conception of congruence is important. It is not a concept to be free about, in my opinion. (06/03/98)

Incidentally, on **empathy**:

Yes, I do think it is "valuable to abandon the principle of empathy" under certain circumstances. (06/03/98)

There have been dialogues around the differentiation between 'counselling' and 'psychotherapy'. Another theme of late was around the **actualising tendency**, some saying that they didn't believe in it at all, but were person-centred, some saying that you didn't have to believe in the actualising tendency for the PCA core conditions to promote growth, some saying that you had to believe and trust in the actualising tendency...

At the risk of your experiencing a feeling of tedium, I select a few highlights from these contributions. How do you feel and what do you think as you hear them?

It just seems to describe the way I work

'Non-directive' seems very often to be linked with 'person-centred'

People claiming to be PCA is the most common claim

Most people have heard of three core conditions. They see them as necessary, but all too often do not see them as sufficient

"Being nice" is person-centred

If it were simply a question of my own beliefs and others, I would unreservedly celebrate the differences. But when I hear people's outrage at 'person-centred' counselling...

I have NOT been interested in talking about what is person-centred

They work in so many ways, that we cannot understand what is "really" client-centred or person-centred therapy

I do not believe in the actualising tendency, but I am person-centred

I am client-centred because I want to be non-directive and the client-centred attitude gives me a good way to be non-directive

If client centred therapy is basically a useful way to frame being non-directive as a therapist then it begins to sound more like a technique to me

I have been deeply frustrated and angered at those numerous counsellors who claim to be person-centred plus a little bit of this and a lot of that. It does the profession no good at all

People describe the approach as a wishy washy sentimental kind of relating; It is rigorous, disciplined and certainly sufficient

Dialogues happen which stem from the lack of even a basic agreement that our approach is built on the foundations of Carl Rogers works

If we cannot agree on such a fundamental level when we name ourselves in an approach, then what hope is there? Can we really expect CCT/PCA to be taken seriously?

Disbelief at what is 'sold' as person centred

The wonders of the approach are wrapped up in our diversity, our perspectives, and our shared positions

*People calling themselves 'Person-Centred' when they are nothing of the kind
Integrity is damaged by other people using the term to mean an eclectic mishmash with no coherent theory or philosophy*

It is very important that PCC/CCT has a clear identity in the world

This approach does have boundaries

I don't share the concern about the need for boundaries, nor am I concerned that we reach agreement about what pca is about

There can be a combining of the purely client-determined character of these special purpose counselling experiences with pursuit of the special goals

PCA can be seen as a set of skills

Carl Rogers believed that the approach was quite definitely not about skills, or techniques - it was more about a way of being

'Non-directive' skills generate a flow which the person implementing the skills goes along with ('go with the flow'), whereas the therapist understands more of the flow, is IN the flow, trusts in the flow

It is of fundamental importance that we can at least agree (or accept) the foundations of our approach

Practice which uses a bit of TA here, a bit of Gestalt there, some relaxation techniques and the occasional psychodynamic interpretation - and calls it Person-Centred

What is my responsibility - our responsibility as a community?

Differences in what is pca is not going to kill the approach

I have more concern that orthodoxy will do more damage to the approach than narrowly defined boundaries

Anyone who wants to be "called" a PCA practitioner, can be. Everybody is welcome

Anyone who intends to call himself "Person-centred" can do it

I'm searching for a framework, for a reference, a centre from where all this diversity came. Am I alone in this searching?

What alarms me slightly is the fervour with which such PCA beliefs are held

A basis for a wondrous variety of understandings and perceptions

Why in the world are we limiting the approach to the professions?

Need to establish a foundational statement

If you refrain from the core conditions you are not THEORETICALLY person-centred.

You may be person-centred IN ACTION

The meaning of Carl Rogers' theory is not validly open to any interpretation

It is "valuable to abandon the principle of empathy" under certain circumstances

And so on

For me, I feel both an excitement at the rich diversity of those associated with the person-centred approach, and yet also concern at some of the beliefs and practises which evidence suggests is damaging to our collective identity. For me, this represents a key issue - for those of us interested in it - to address for all our futures.

2. Person-Centred Approach: Membership / Accreditation?

The above 'snapshot' of views around what PCA is, isn't, should be, could be, might be, will be, ought to be - et cetera, and all relatively recent - may give rise to speculation around membership, with particular reference to inclusion and exclusion. More quotes:

The nature of the approach allows for people to exclude themselves and thousands have. However, unless one is prepared to say one definition of pca is better than another, and deal with us rebellious souls who find that such a definition inaccurate and thus an anathema, I don't see how one can exclude people. (02/03/98)

I think that this is the PCA's pitfall: The fact that we CAN NOT exclude anybody is a pitfall. The approach itself is so open, so unconditional, that it does not allow us to exclude anybody. Thus, the community of the PCA is open to anybody and everybody. Does it mean that the PCA is everything? This is the reason why I think we need to distinguish the approach itself from the community of people who say that they "use" this approach or they "are" person-centred. I agree we can not exclude anybody, but even then we can exclude "theoretically" what is or what is not PCA. We need some "theoretical" boundaries. If we don't have these boundaries, or this identity, PCA becomes nothing or anything. If we don't have these boundaries we would be able to "kill ourselves", becoming nothing, because we have got this pitfall: We HAVE TO accept anybody as person-centred. (02/03/98)

I see the struggle we as PCA/CCT community go through somewhat differently to yours... A point for me is the practical application of that defined theory. People might be initially attracted to it because of its simplicity and the positive outlook of the human being and its development. But we fall short of that theoretical framework (at least I do) more often than I would like to admit and that painful experience is what reminds of my humanness. It keeps me humble and works like an insurance policy for my clients. I'm not talking about malpractice insurance here. I'm talking about ethical insurance that reminds me that we are "one" in unsuccess, mishap or whatever humanness creates. I want the CCT/PCA to consist of theoreticians and practitioners, of people who believe it and people who just like all or just parts of it. As part of good supervision and personal development I agree with my friend Charly O'Leary who wrote that we (PCA/CCT) should go to at least one workshop of another theoretical orientation a year AND DON'T BE DISRUPTIVE! (*I'm sorry, I accidentally deleted the date*)

If a hundred of us came together and agreed on every major point, I guess that would validate something, somehow. But if one or two people then came forward with different perspectives, would I want them "in" or "out"? (26/02/98)

Suppose one can establish the identity of PCA, and suppose that one gains world-wide acceptance of the understanding of that identity. One still risks not defining it for hundreds, thousands. If one definition of PCA becomes the bench mark for what is PCA, others who disagree would automatically be excluded. What matters to me is sharing from who I am and struggling to grasp something of what you are saying which includes living with my misunderstanding of what you or others try to say. (28/02/98)

I can hold one view and quickly change it. I sometimes even value, in others, a certainty which I see in them and know I have never felt. At other times I see that same certainty as rigidity, or acceptance of dogma. If a person tells me that the "medical model" of "mental health" works for him or her, I am interested, but in a sceptical sort of way. I am not really ready to hear that...

... I have already rejected it, tentatively anyway. But if a person SELF IDENTIFIES as being person centred, I am likely to be more open to the differences between us, since I expect the similarities to allow me at least to listen, and allow me to more easily respect the differences, and risk being changed by them. (26/02/98)

Again some - this time brief - key highlights:

I don't see how one can exclude people

The fact that we CAN NOT exclude anybody is a pitfall

We HAVE TO accept anybody as person-centred

PCA consists of theoreticians and practitioners, people who believe it and people who just like parts of it

If people came forward with different perspectives, would I want them "in" or "out"?

If a person SELF IDENTIFIES as being person centred, I am likely to be more open to the differences between us

If one definition of PCA becomes the bench mark for what is PCA, others who disagree would automatically be excluded

Again, it seems to me that issues around inclusion and exclusion - 'us' and 'them', if you will - are key issues for those interested to explore with reference to all our futures...

As regards accreditation issues, Dave Means wrote "The idea of accreditation may not sit well with a number of people in the specialism", and one BAPCA member has already written to me:

BAPCA still seems to be facing a decision about quasi accreditation or legitimisation of certain practitioners as truly "client- or person-centred". It seems to me that it is a mistake to go down this road for many reasons, but not least because it is through dialogue and openness to experience that change and development in theory and practice will take place. Anyone who sits in judgement of another's' practice must exercise that judgement very carefully and I doubt whether members could afford to pay the kind of fees necessary for the bureaucracy to make that work as well as their UKCP, BAC, et cetera, et cetera. (06/03/98)

Carl Rogers wrote ('A Way Of Being', 1980, pp 244-248) of three drawbacks to accreditation/ licensing (et cetera):

(1) the effect of freezing the profession in a past image; (2) "there are as many *certified* charlatans and exploiters of people as there are uncertified"... "Certification is *not* equivalent to competence" and (3) "the urge toward professionalism builds up a rigid bureaucracy".

3. Person-Centred Approach Training?

I wrote several contributions to the cctpca network as regards differentiating between the *implementation of counselling skills* and *being a counsellor*. In my opinion, many (if not most) counselling skills programmes describe the skills taught or learned as 'non-directive' or 'humanistic'...

... And it is my experience that many people implementing 'non-directive' skills then describe themselves as 'person-centred' - because, as Dave Mearns pointed out, 'it most closely describes the way I work'.

Many respondents objected to my comments on the grounds that they felt I was in some way detracting from or undervaluing the intrinsic worth of counselling skills training programmes. Far from it! However, most respondents seemed to me to be in broad agreement. Here are a few examples:

I think it is important to note that for many people in the UK the first training in counselling is a certificate in counselling skills which is often a first very powerful introduction to PCA. Many people then go on to take a diploma in counselling. So I would not want to demean in any way these courses per se but I take your point that many trainers call themselves and their courses person-centred and many trainees get a distorted view. (06/03/98)

I had commented that very often I heard of people calling themselves PCA yet using a variety of techniques from approaches other than person-centred. How often do we hear a practitioner saying 'I am psychodynamic, but I throw in a bit of PCA, gestalt, T.A., oh, and a bit of Egan and art if it's appropriate?'. Just this week, I heard of an agency, proclaiming that it was 'person-centred', that turned down six applicants by trainee counsellors for placements. One was told she was too committed to the person-centred approach, three were refused flat without any reasonable explanation, and two were told that if they took psychodynamic analytic therapy for themselves for six months or so they might be re-considered. All six were told 'we are person-centred but we use psychodynamic techniques'. I am not alone:

I think you are right about the respect given to psychodynamic and other approaches versus the view that CCT is easy and a matter of making certain responses. *I think skills courses are a mistake if one wants to help people learn cct.* The task in teaching cct is developing attitudes and values. *Skills training confuses the students.* The activity of practising interactions of empathic following can help develop the therapeutic attitudes, but the course has to be reiterating over and over that the goals are attitudes and every practice of following needs to be followed up with discussion and critique of the attitudes. I was also surprised to learn from someone's e-mail that "open questions" are taught as one of the skills of CCT. Wow! Questions for clarification are one thing, but open questions are *leading* questions and should occur very seldom in CCT. In over 40 years I have probably asked only one or two clients "Do you experience any feelings or reactions about that?" or such an "open question", much less open questions of other sorts. (07/03/98)

(Actually, I didn't write that 'open-ended questions' are taught as part of client-centred therapy, I wrote that 'non-directive' skills tend to be labelled 'person-centred' by many). And another:

For me it is very important that those offering basic skills courses begin to say what they are doing and to differentiate that from the PCA approach, or any other for that matter. In my experience these certificate courses are often the first self development experience the students have had. They are consequently often profoundly affected and it is that depth of touch of their person which we need to be careful not to undermine...

... The first learnings about listening coupled with often the first experience of being heard, added to some basic interpersonal skills are not the same thing as a beginning in the PCA... for me anyway. I feel strongly that all those offering such training have a responsibility to be clear and to declare what it is and what it is not that they are offering. Where to start? I guess if I take it back to myself and the likes of this network then the same is required of us. Some agreement on what PCA is or isn't then feels very important... Surely somewhere or other we need to begin to invite all the confusion of conceptions about the approach, and counselling in general, into the public domain, to enable clarity and therefore greater freedom of choice. I feel for the trainee who is charged with enthusiasm and some skill, and a variable understanding of 'being' a counsellor... And where if at all does our responsibility lie in encouraging open dialogue around all of this between the agencies, the public, and ourselves the practitioners and proclaimers of a particular approach? (06/03/98)

And:

The Skills course I run I make very clear the distinctions between PCA and Skills and I find the people on it are very responsive to this. But I also know that this is not always the case. Maybe we, the PCA world, need to produce guidance for distinguishing counselling skills from PCA for course co-ordinators? (06/03/98)

While I have every sympathy for those defending skills programmes (and I certainly feel defensive about the skills programmes at my own place of learning), I think that many of the comments missed my point: My belief is that people attending skills courses in approaches OTHER than person-centred may also finish their course enthused, motivated, eager to continue... Just as a for instance: I'd hazard a guess that someone completing a skills training course in which psychodynamic analytic therapy was the core approach could also be enthused, motivated, may have really listened and felt really heard for the first time - and so on - yet my inkling is that such people are far less likely to call themselves psychodynamic practitioners AT THIS STAGE IN THEIR LEARNING than is the case with 'non-directive' or 'humanistic' skills programmes, where people are perhaps more likely to describe themselves as person-centred *'because that most closely describes the way I work'*.

One of the contributors, quoted above, wrote "I was also surprised to learn from someone's e-mail that "open questions" are taught as one of the skills of CCT. I confess that I do not know of any instance (you, of course, might!) where 'open-ended questioning' has *specifically* been taught (or learned) as a PCA skill (and it would seem evident that an open-ended question remains an open-ended question *whatever* the theoretical orientation of the person implementing the skill), yet I know of many, many instances where such skills (and one could include summarising, paraphrasing and so on) are described as 'non-directive' (or 'humanistic'), which is then confused with, or perceived as, or believed to be, person-centred.

In my view, even more alarming is 'reflecting' and 'reflecting feelings', in my experience often described as 'person-centred' and even more frequently confused with, or perceived as, or believed to be, person-centred. Carl Rogers wrote (page 138 of 'A Way Of Being'): -

“reflect” becoming in time a word that made me cringe

Rogers wrote that much of his research involved “analysing, in very minute detail, the ebb and flow of the process... But this tendency to focus on the therapist’s responses had appalling consequences”, in that the approach became characterised as a technique or set of ‘non-directive’ techniques, typified by such skills as reflecting, summarising, paraphrasing, open-ended questioning (and so on). I guess that if it was bad enough to appal Carl Rogers, it has a significance for me...

Many contributors to the various networks, and many people with whom I have spoken, have expressed a concern around wanting to *protect* the person-centred approach yet without excluding people unfairly. What did Carl Rogers have to say about accreditation and regulation?

So, though I know it must sound horrendous, I would like to see all the energy we put into certification rules, qualifications, licensure legislation [*et cetera*] rechannelled into assisting [*practitioners/trainers et cetera*] to become so effective, so devoted to human welfare, that they would be chosen over those who are actually unqualified, whether or not they possess paper credentials.

As a supplement to guide the public, we might set up the equivalent of a Consumer Protective Service. If one complaint comes in about ineffective or unethical behaviour, it might well be explained away. But if many complaints come in about an individual’s service to the public, then his name should be made available to the public, with the suggestion “Let the buyer beware”.

Meanwhile, let us develop our learning processes in psychology in such new ways that we are of significantly more service to the public than the “instant gurus”, the developers of new and untried fads, the exploiters who feed on a public obviously hungry to be dependent on someone who claims to have *the* answer to all human problems. When our own lasting helpfulness is clearly evident, then we will have no need for our elaborate machinery for certifying and licensing.

(‘A Way Of Being’, page 248)

3. Person-Centred Approach: Any Ways Forward?

What options are open to us? Options might include:

Let it Be...

Clearly, one option is to do nothing, to leave things as they are. It is worth noting that it was only last year that BAPCA abolished different membership categories, and this measure was voted for by the majority at the 1997 AGM (Cardiff). Now, you either are a member of BAPCA or you aren’t. I remember someone raising the idea of Bernard Manning joining BAPCA, and the majority view seemed to be that we would welcome Bernard Manning, and that perhaps *given the right conditions* he would prove to be constructive, forward moving, responsible, sociable... Yet would the ‘do nothing’ option sit comfortably with those who feel that the person-centred approach is under threat?

Accreditation

Another option would be to only accept as BAPCA members those who have completed BAC Accredited training programmes, and only trainees currently undertaking BAC accredited programmes would be eligible for Associate membership (which Dave Mearns indicated to be the system in Scotland). Yet would this system sit comfortably with those who believe that our Association should not exclude people, those who welcome the rich diversity of membership?

Directory of Practitioners

Then there is the issue of the Directory of Practitioners. The 1997 Directory was not produced, and now sits with me. I feel very uncertain as to what to do with it. Who is it for? Mike Farrell spent a lot of time and effort in producing a Practitioners Statement. I find it interesting that one area of controversy was over the 'sufficient' part of the PCA core conditions being 'necessary *and sufficient*', and my understanding is that many practitioners do incorporate other aspects into their work - would we want to exclude them? I have heard several 'full and frank exchanges of views', as the politicians say, with regard to Natalie Rogers - some argue that she goes *beyond* the core conditions as set out by her father, others that she should not describe herself as person-centred because the introduction of arts media into her work indicates that the PCA core conditions are *not* sufficient...

Incidentally, I personally believe that our Directory, if we are to have one, should include a Complaints Procedure (perhaps 'Complaints' could become a BAPCA Executive post?), and perhaps we could work along the lines suggested by Carl Rogers?

BAC and others...

Then there is BAC, the British Association for Counselling. I do not know the history, yet have sensed a feel of 'no love lost' between BAPCA and BAC - or at least a reluctance to directly engage with BAC. Does this serve the membership? Is there a wisdom in BAPCA being more directly involved with BAC on behalf of our membership, either to 'lobby' BAC with regard to the person-centred approach, or to represent or support our members?

Training

And there is training. It was Richard Bryant-Jefferies (BAPCA Executive member) who contributed:

Maybe we, the PCA world, need to produce guidance for distinguishing counselling skills from PCA for course co-ordinators?

Thus another way forward might be for BAPCA to play an active role through engaging with validating bodies - BAC, CENTRA, AEB/CSCT, RSA, and so on. If, for instance, the membership believes that it is helpful to meaningfully yet sensitively differentiate between the implementation of skills ('non-directive' or otherwise) and being a counsellor (perhaps skills development might be a step on the way to *becoming* a counsellor, as opposed to *being* one?), might we attempt to influence training 'authorities' along this line?

Perhaps BAPCA could consider more workshops, more training events, more literature (whatever) dedicated to the principles Carl Rogers gave us in the quotes herein (and, of course, elsewhere)?

A Personal View

Where do I stand in all of this? At times and with some issues I think know (yet would like to believe that I am open to development and change), at other times and with other issues I am not so sure. My belief is that BAPCA should continue to welcome any and all members who have an interest in the person-centred approach. Perhaps, though - and I am not so sure about this - we could be more selective when it comes to our Directory of Practitioners - maybe a little like the BAC Directory, we could differentiate between those BAC (or UKCP) accredited practitioners and non-accredited practitioners, maybe with other comments around accreditation not necessarily being the be-all-and-end-all? I would like to see us develop a complaints procedure which could be included within the Directory, and perhaps we might consider following a path similar to the one mooted by Carl Rogers himself ('Let the buyer beware'!)?

I believe strongly that BAPCA could be more involved (perhaps in partnership with others) with trainers. I believe that I feel this so strongly in part because I look back with embarrassment at skills courses for which I have been responsible, and believe that I may have contributed to the link between 'non-directive' skills training and people aligning themselves with person-centred counselling (even last week, I was moderating an Introduction to Counselling Skills course, and after just 24 hours attendance trainees were saying things like 'When I am counselling...')... I confess! It took me some years to become more clear myself about the differentiation between implementing skills and counselling. Now I cannot identify any particular or specific point at which it could be said 'THAT' was the exact moment when I moved from becoming a counsellor to being one' - yet I do believe that clarity has developed and continues to do so.

I thank you for your attention.