

Chapter 1

OPENING REMARKS

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Is the person-centred approach political? The answer to this question often seems clear when people first discover the person-centred approach (PCA). They frequently speak of how the politics and ethics that it is founded upon attracted them. Rogers' (1978) claim that the approach is 'revolutionary' focuses on how the PCA challenged traditional approaches to therapy and relating based on hierarchies; instead promoting an egalitarian ideal of humans relating as equal persons, whatever their roles, status or position.

Surely an approach based on challenging hierarchies and authorities and advocating trust in oneself is political? Surely an approach that aims to liberate us from internalized messages from others (conditions of worth), to be able to grow as individual unique people, is political? Surely an approach so concerned with avoiding taking power over people, and promoting personal power is political? Surely a theory that suggests that distress is not the result of internal individual dysfunction but a result of dysfunctional relationships is political?

Yet the connection between the person-centred approach and politics is far from clear or straightforward. Politics usually involves acting as a collective and speaking about groups of people. However, speaking as 'we' is unusual in the person-centred world. It could be that an emphasis on the uniqueness of each individual and a phenomenological approach seems to lead to a denial or missing of commonalities among people. It could be that a focus on all persons as equal regardless of role or status, leads to an obscuring of inequalities and the effects of this in society. Recently in person-centred literature, the approach has been criticized for its individualism, and lack of attention to the socio-political context. (For further consideration of how structural positions affect therapy and the importance of the therapist's awareness of this see, for example, Kearney, 1996; Moodley, Lago & Talahite, 2004 and Proctor & Napier, 2004.)

Traditionally, professional bodies representing counsellors or therapists have made a point not to take a political position, suggesting these professions should be 'apolitical'. Samuels (in Pointon, 2006) warns that statutory regulation could make political involvement even more difficult for counsellors and therapists. Many, who are well aware that to be 'apolitical' means supporting the status quo, hoped for a different response from the person-centred community, and this is one of the essential theses of this book (see Sanders, Chapter 11 and Proctor

Chapter 9, this volume). However, it seems to be the experience of many people that politics is ignored or sidelined in the PCA, and those who hoped for a home in the person-centred community with like-minded political people are often left disappointed and frustrated. Barfield (2004, and Chapter 22, this volume) describes her story of putting feminism on the agenda in person-centred circles at the Center for Studies of the Person in La Jolla, California (where Carl Rogers was based), in the 1970s. She describes a range of reactions, ranging from defensiveness and hostility to trying to understand what she was saying about commonalities among women. Wolter-Gustafson (personal communication, see Proctor & Napier, 2004: 2) discussed how over decades of trying to get feminism on the agenda at person-centred conferences in the US, she was met with a similar range of reactions. However, she also expressed hope that the recent increasing acceptance of politics could lead to politics becoming a legitimate topic. Indeed, this hope follows a similar trajectory in the UK—almost becoming a noticeable trend. The British Association for the Person-Centred Approach (BAPCA) conference in 2002 had a theme of ‘difference and diversity’, setting the tone for discussion of inequalities and politics and allowing them to become a prominent theme of discussion throughout. My experience of the various reactions to these issues ranged from hostility, defensiveness and protesting irrelevance to relief that finally a space had been found to discuss these issues. There did seem to be a growing body of people wanting to find a bigger space to put together politics and the person-centred approach. This was reminiscent of previous person-centred meetings where anything political was brought to the agenda (see Proctor & Napier, 2004: 1–2). In October 2005, a network was formed at a Person-Centred Therapy Scotland conference on ‘Politics and the PCA’. The new network, ‘Person-Centered Practitioners for Social Change’ (PCPSC) agreed the following statement at the first meeting:

We want to voice our opposition to inequalities and oppression in the world.
We celebrate diversity and commit ourselves to working towards social justice.
We aim to raise public awareness about the political, social and economic causes of distress in society.
We aim to promote relationships where people listen to each other and each person has a voice.
We believe in acting with honesty, integrity and transparency, whilst aiming to value and understand all others.

So what do we mean by politics, or political? Politics involves looking at society and groups of people, of speaking about how our world is organized and resources distributed. It involves inequalities between people in this distribution and in opportunities and how this is dealt with. Fundamentally it is rooted in sociology rather than psychology, studying society and groups of people and their relationships rather than individual internal psyches. Major political movements

such as feminism focus on commonalities among people as a result of their shared position in society. Of course, a simplistic broad-brush approach to talking as if big groups of people are all in the same position is a strategy that was much criticized in second wave feminism (see Warner, 2004). This critique recognized that other aspects of identity (such as ethnicity, class and sexuality) in addition to gender led to important differences among various groups of women. The later move towards 'identity politics' brought a much more individualized approach to politics, emphasizing again the uniqueness of individuals and the 'right' to this uniqueness. This position prioritized the voice of personal experience and each individual's unique story. However, as with a phenomenological method such as the person-centred approach, using each person's individual experience to campaign for political change fails to analyse the structures of power involved in whose experiences are heard. Warner (2004) discusses the dilemmas inherent in using personal experiences politically and suggests we need to be mindful and clear about what strategies are useful in using personal experience. The challenge for politics today is to incorporate all these perspectives from major political movements such as feminism, to be able to talk about commonalities as a result of oppressed positions and structures in society, whilst not ignoring differences within groups of people. Can the person-centred approach live up to this challenge?

This collection of writings is an attempt to begin to answer the question. In this book, we explore the interface between the person-centred approach and radical political theory and activity. Specifically, it aims to explore the contribution that a critical analysis of social and political factors can make to the theory and practice of person-centred therapy, and to examine the contribution that person-centred theory and practice can make to the wider sphere of socio-political theory and activity. This is a gathering of many different voices; a range of contributions from academic theorizing and critical analysis through personal testimony, and description of radical projects to practical suggestions for change.

We hope this collection will encourage the reader to consider their own political positioning both within the PCA and in the wider world, and perhaps inspire contributions to this continuing agenda, both by debate and action for change.

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