'A Fair Field Full of Folk': Humanistic and Psychodynamic Therapy

Nick Totton

I entered the field of psychotherapy through the gate marked 'humanistic'; but Wilhelm Reich, who developed the style of therapy that I was taught, worked within the psychoanalytic tradition. Although he is often claimed as one of the founding parents of humanistic therapy, Reich himself - unlike Perls and Berne, for example, who also started as psychoanalysts - never announced himself as 'humanistic'; his break with the analysts was primarily about the use of bodywork and about his left wing politics, and in many ways Reich's technique remained firmly psychodynamic.

Because of this confused parentage, then - and because my subsequent explorations have been pretty much equally in psychodynamic and humanistic directions - I have a strong interest in trying to clarify the relationship between these two elements of the psychotherapeutic tradition. This interest has been intensified by the difficulties I have with UKCP's attitude towards different forms of therapy: its assumption both that *every* form of therapy can be lumped together as versions of a single activity, and also that *each* form of therapy can be specified as belonging to one sub-form or another, and hence fitted into one section or another (with 'integrative' housing everyone who doesn't fit elsewhere).

There are all sorts of problems with this approach - epistemological, historical, logical and political, to name only a few; among them, the assumption of mutual recognition and respect between the different therapies. My own experience is that psychodynamic and humanistic practitioners, for example, are on the whole divided by enormous gulfs of mutual ignorance and contempt. Psychodynamic therapists tend strongly to assume that humanists are sloppy, sentimental, unreliable, and indulgent of their clients and themselves. Humanistic therapists tend strongly to assume that psycho-dynamicists are cold, intellectual, avoidant, manipulative and rigid. In reality, neither generally has a clue about the actuality of the other approach.

Having wandered quite widely among psychoanalysts, growth workers, body psychotherapists, humanistic and psychodynamic therapists of many schools and disciplines, I want to share some of my impressions and conclusions. I talked earlier of psychotherapy as a single field with more than one gate into it. Despite a number of complications and reservations, I think that this is the most accurate way to conceptualise it. That field, however, is full of people doing all sorts of different things; and, like figures in some medieval morality picture, most of them can't see each other!

In one corner of my picture, for example, two practitioners are standing right next to each other, and performing almost identical activities, but facing in opposite directions. One calls herself a gestalt therapist, the other, a psychoanalyst; both of them are working primarily to facilitate their clients' spiritual awareness. Neither knows the other is there, although they happen to live on nearby streets. Near them is a group of three analytic therapists, tied together with official ropes; each of them treats their clients quite differently - one with contempt, one with deep respect, and one with fear. However, they belong to the same professional body, and believe themselves to be doing the same thing.

And so on, right across this enormous and spacious field: the relationship between title, theory and practice is more or less completely arbitrary. What someone was originally trained to do, and what they are officially paid to do, may both be quite different from what they actually do. Perhaps the most important distinction for us to make, in other words, is not between psychodynamic and humanistic therapy, but between *theory* and *practice*. I have very strong theoretical views about how psychotherapy should be done; but I am forced to recognise that according to all the evidence, therapeutic effectiveness, as judged by clients, has nothing much to do with what theory the practitioner espouses, and everything to do with what sort of person they are (Seligman 1995). Ultimately, my theoretical interests may be little more than a hobby!

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Of course there is another way of reading the research on this issue. It is true that clients report good therapeutic outcomes when a good relationship was established between therapist and client; and also true that this does not correlate with the therapist's theoretical allegiance (not even for person centred therapy, which might reasonably expect such a correlation). However, there are certain trends of thinking within *every* school of therapy which specifically focus on establishing a good relationship based on respect and

openness. This emphasis is by no means the exclusive property of humanist therapy! Here, for example, is a passage from a recent book by a well-known British psychoanalyst with strong links to the French tradition:
'There is ... a common technique [in analysis] based on the establishment of trust, openness and flexibility. The analyst has to shift as necessary, and secure flexibility - if necessary, by admitting mistakes, apologizing, acknowledging significant gestures, gifts, greeting cards, and so forth - in order to remain 'in touch'. *There is no difference here between the analytic relationship and any other caring and mutually respectful relationship'* (Stanton 1997, 125, my italics)

So much for the idea that psychoanalysis is inevitably cool, technical and avoidant! Of course, many analysts do have those sorts of qualities in their work. So do some humanists. Humanists, on the other hand, quite frequently fail to respect the client in a different way - by placing too much reliance on their own intuition and 'gut feelings', without sufficiently questioning where their impulses come from and whether they might contain elements of projection and counter transference. And the same can be said of certain analysts (see Masson 1991).

What perhaps follows from this sort of reading of the situation is that a different kind of dialogue is required from the organisational version which is currently beginning to happen. The most important thing is dialogue not between *organisations*, but between *individual practitioners*. Then we might begin to see just how truly pluralistic the current situation is; all sorts of alliances might start to form across the current frontiers between schools and disciplines. And ultimately, we would no longer be able to blame anything on schools: each of us would have to take responsibility for our own work.

Further Reading

Jeffrey Masson (1991) Final Analysis: The Making and Unmaking of a Psychoanalyst (London: Harper Collins)

Martin Seligman (1995) 'The Effectiveness of Psychotherapy: The Consumer Reports Study' *American Psychologist* 50 (12), 965-74

Martin Stanton (1997) *Out of Order: Clinical Work and Unconscious Process* (London: Rebus Press)

Nick Totton is a psychotherapist, group leader and trainer in private practice, based in Leeds. He is the author of Treichenian Growth Work, (Prism), The Water in the Glass (Rebus) and Psychotherapy and Politics (Sage).

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