

Non-Directivity: A Quality of Relationship

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Open yourself to the Tao, then trust your natural responses; and everything will fall into place...Only in being lived by the Tao can you be truly yourself. (Lao Tzu)

Let your children grow up as nature (or God) has made it. Don't try to improve nature. Try, instead to understand and protect it. (Wilhelm Reich)

One of the principles of the person-centred approach and person-centred therapy is that of non-directivity. For Rogers, who questioned therapists' needs and desires to dominate others and specifically clients, this was a principled stance of support for the developing, human organism which has an inherent tendency to actualise. While Rogers' view is not unique, and found in the works of people as diverse as Lao Tzu and Wilhelm Reich, he was the first to advocate and promote a non-directive attitude on the part of the therapist.

As a person-centred psychotherapist a number of questions interest me about this principle:

- To what extent do I recognise and understand the ordering or organising forces in my self and in my relationships?
- What do my clients take from being in relationship with me and how do I know if my influence is for the liberation or distortion of their potential?
- How does unified, coherent, creative and responsive activity with a sense of direction arise?

The first question refers to my self-awareness as a therapist in relationship. The second to my client in relationship, and the third refers to myself, my client and the relationship. In a relationship

between two people neither can be considered in isolation. However, it is possible to consider the relationship from the therapist's perspective and from the client's. In this article I discuss directivity and direction and the concept of the therapist's non-directive attitude; the self-direction of the client; and, in conclusion, argue that non-directivity is better viewed as a quality of the client-therapist relationship.

Directivity and direction

These terms are closely linked but are not the same. I refer to directivity as the extent to which a person is unknowingly biased, or knowingly choiceful with respect to creative possibilities. Both persons in the relationship have directivity. The therapist has directivity for herself, hopefully largely in awareness, i.e. she takes responsibility for herself as an individual (the substantial aspect of the person and reflecting her trend towards autonomy) as well as for herself-in-relationship (the relational aspect of the person and

expressing her trend towards homonomy) (see Angyal, 1941). My own experience of this directivity is that I am prepared to take full responsibility for my choices and their consequences in relationship with another. Because I like to be free to move and act, and I know that I will have some bias out of my awareness, I need to have confidence in my own trustworthiness in relationship. Therefore I have to have maximum possible openness to feedback in the relationship, and be willing to learn in a unique relationship. Feedback refers to communication. It involves both the client's being and what I can perceive including what I smell, taste, see, hear, experience emotionally and sense energetically. Complex systems involve non-linear feedback. So, I am directive with respect to myself only; I make choices for myself, with respect to myself, which are consistent with my acceptant recognition of my experiences; and I am dependent upon communication in the therapeutic relationship for my decisions and direction.



My client's directivity may be more or less in awareness, may be internalised from others or resulting from fixed decisions which have been made at earlier times. My client may be directive with respect to herself and with respect to me – what I call the push and pull of the relationship.

Direction has past, present and future aspects. It is moment-

to-moment process and outcome over time. It is what happens in the emerging moment. As complex processes in open systems (as humans are) are irreversible, we experience time in one direction i.e. chronological time. Such irreversibility makes form possible. What forms in the time I spend with a client is the process in which we are both involved. So while we have direction, I as a therapist do not need to be directive. This process has everything to do with me and everything to do with my client. This is what makes it relational, and why I am more interested in viewing non-directivity as a quality of that relationship rather than an attitude of the therapist.

In order to support inevitable direction, we need ordering of the nature that balances chaos rather than suppresses chaos. Thus, my job as a psychotherapist is to be in a way which enables the creation of space for possibilities as well as the coherent organising of those possibilities by my client. It follows that I need to be aware of myself, the other and our relationship, and if necessary, to be able to communicate understandings of awareness of the assumptions embedded in our language and behaviour, and the ways in which we organise our perceptions, both of which affect the nature of emerging possibilities as well as their organisation.

The practice of non-directivity is the intentional living of trust in natural organising processes given that the persons in relationship experience being in empathic connection and where

there is no threat to their belonging. The willingness to be part of, to accept and trust nature and to live in sustainable connection, acknowledges us as part of a larger complex system upon which we impact and are dependent. This also acknowledges a connection between person-centred theory, and chaos and complexity theory. In his book *Chaos*, Gleick (1997, p.5) says that 'to some physicists chaos is a science of process rather than state, of becoming rather than being.' This echoes Rogers, who in the last fifteen years of his life, was interested in and referred to the work of Prigogine, a pioneer of chaos theory. Other person-centred writers, such as Seeman, Sanford and Haugh, all make connections between person-centred theory and chaos theory, and suggest that chaos theory might support further explication of concepts in the approach. Thus, according to chaos theory, when a complex system is functioning at the edge of chaos, it is self-organising; direction is emergent and towards a new order. From a person-centred therapeutic perspective, I think that empathic connection and communicated positive regard are dynamic phenomena which allow and support natural organising in relationships. In an inter-subjective field, characterised by empathic, non-evaluative trusting, harmonious ordering in me – and a client – comes into play.

The non-directive attitude

Traditionally, non-directivity is seen as an attitude existing in therapist. The therapist embodies the utmost respect for

and trust in the client and seeks to understand the client, simply to understand her or him. This means that the therapist gives up any thought of controlling, guiding or (re)ordering the client. It means that the therapist lives a commitment to understanding the forms of ordering and controlling which she uses in her life and those which impact upon her from her environment. Thus, I ask myself, 'To what extent do I allow experience, perceive the significance of my experiencing and trust in my own resources and capacities to respond to a situation in the absence of domination or submission? To what extent do I find myself a relaxed, responsive and creative person in relationship with others and the world? To what extent do I recognise that my meaning making helps or inhibits my flourishing and that of others?'

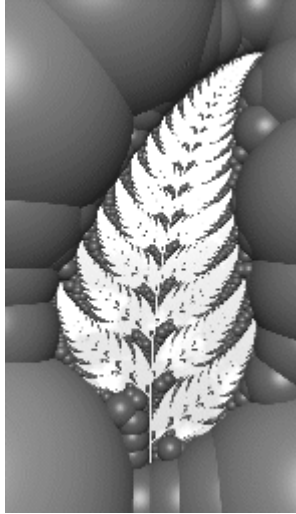
Seen from a systems perspective, we can see a therapist as a complex open and changing system. Thus I see congruent functioning as an emergent phenomenon; it is not a fixed quality, and it cannot be forced or contrived. If the therapist is open to her experiencing and is experiencing empathic acceptance within herself and of the other, her way of being is emergent, immediate, idiosyncratic, spontaneous, relevant and efficient. Her direction is both a process and an outcome resulting from living a balance between chaos and order, a balance which results in flow in relating. In this sense we can see the therapist as, at her best, self-organising at the edge of chaos and in flow.

The direction of the client

Non-directivity is fundamental to the person-centred approach because it views and assumes the client as having her own direction. A therapist cannot ever know what experiential phenomena will emerge in a client, nor the significance of those phenomena in advance of the client. If we believe in the human organism's tendency to actualise then any direction or directivity introduced by the therapist with respect to the client is interference and is a potentially distorting dynamic in the relationship. Any such interruption has direct consequences for the potential for emergence of experiential phenomena in the client and for the way the phenomena are organised into meaning. As Kriz (2006, p.176) puts it, in terms of chaos theory:

During the self-organised formation (so called 'emergence'), these order parameters first develop in relation to competing possibilities of order by means of weak fluctuations. Some of these alternatives of possible order, however do not represent the overall condition of the system and its surroundings as well as others – as a consequence they lose the competition and their special contribution to the dynamic becomes weaker and weaker.

In other words, in order to facilitate the emergence of personally significant phenomena within the system of the client, the 'overall condition of the system', i.e. the



relationship between the client and the therapist, must be able to receive those phenomena into awareness or else significant phenomena may be lost.

For example, I tend to live on the side of chaos. Writing this article and talking to my partner I likened my ideas to children running riot at a party. I want them to settle down so that we can play a game together in a coherent way. I want a game (a way of being with) that offers some structure (an attractor for alignment of behaviour), and freedom to allow spontaneous, unpredictable and exciting outcomes. When I experience too much feedback I am in turbulence. I need sufficient structuring in order to experience flow. Right now in my area of vulnerability about writing this article I am dependent on my editor to relate with me in a

regulating dialogue. Left alone, I experience stuckness and a sense of gloom and defeat. In dialogue with my editor, together we create a self-organising system. The system of our relationship affects my system in the direction of balance. Whilst I still experience uncertainty and even self-defeating behaviour, I am no longer stuck. I find that, in contact with an empathic and accepting person or persons, I feel released from my oppressive and self-persecutory constructs and habits or habitual processes. In relationship, I am alive, and have real choice. In this relationship I do not have the experience of an external incentive or deterrant for a particular direction, I have choice where I could not experience it before. In this real choice I can draw upon my own capacities, create and complete.

It follows that the environment needs to be as free from evaluation as possible. Thus the therapist is – or should be – devoted to perceiving with the client, phenomenologically, and without evaluation, what comes forth in that space. It is then for the client to bring together emerging possibilities of meaning and to choose their own direction.

The non-directivity of the relationship

I express this in a number of linked statements and arguments.

A person is a complex system in relationship with the environment. Complex systems, which are the focus of chaos theory, have the ability to balance order and chaos. This balance point,

referred to as 'the edge of chaos', has many special properties, including self-organisation. Self-organisation gives rise to novel outcomes with observable structures and processes. Human developmental structures and processes result from self-organisation. In the normal course of events, and under the right, growthful conditions, human beings/systems remain open physically and psychologically: as we breathe, we are in relationship with our environment; as we are in communication, we are in relationship with others.

A client is a person who in some way is a closed system or is a person seeking a person with whom they can be open without their integrity being compromised. Under difficult and adverse conditions (such as neglect, abuse, being ignored and so on), we become physically and psychologically closed to being impacted upon and affected by our environment, and the extent to which we are closed distorts our reality. This may have advantages as well as disadvantages. While the ability to close awareness and communication with an external or internal environment may be important in order to protect oneself, it also reduces opportunities for vital life processes. In the language of chaos theory, disorder (or entropy) cannot be 'exported' from a closed system. We need relationships to survive.

A client seeking therapy is, by definition, seeking some sort of health giving communication or relationship. Following on from the previous point, a client is a person who may need an environment in which, disorder can be exported and transformed, and who needs to

receive something restorative from the environment in the form of another. If a person can exchange with the environment in this way, her natural capacities to function can move and continue.

In offering therapy, a therapist is, in effect, trying to co-create something new and different from what client is experiencing elsewhere. If the therapist can accept and receive the way of being of the client, and continue to function and flow in the relationship without needing or trying to change the client, both functions are fulfilled. If the therapist can remain open, flowing and balanced while really taking in the client's communication, and feedback in the relationship in a way that the client recognises herself, an exchange has taken place. If the acceptance is genuine, the feedback to the client is uncontaminated, and if it is empathic, it is digestible. If such an exchange takes place, then chaotic dynamics will be present and re-organisation will occur. Schmid (2002, p.182) talks similarly about 'presence' when he describes it as:

joint experiencing with the client in the given instant. Furthermore, from an epistemological perspective it is a moment-to-moment-process of joint responding to the given developments, experiences and challenges within the therapeutic relationship, which happens in the 'kairos', the fruitful moment.

Not only does the therapist co-create the possibility of a relationship on the edge of chaos and therefore allowing flow again, the therapist is also a co-regulator during chaotic reorganisation in the client. Therefore, the client can be seen as a partially open system organising

in the relational environment co-created by herself and her therapist.

Direction is relational. The task of the therapist is to co-create a self-organising system with the client, in order that the client may experience what it's like to be in flow (again), and to experience empathy and movement. In their area of vulnerability, the client is dependent. When the therapist is in



this way with a client neither the client nor the therapist are directing the process. The direction is the novel outcome, the creative result of two open systems in dynamic interchange. As a psychotherapist, then, my way of being is an exercise of personal responsibility to contribute to the relational system over time in a way that allows the system of the client to function at the edge of creative dynamics. The art of therapy or therapeutic relating is to create with the other a system on the edge of chaos.

We are unable to predict the ways in which complex systems will organise. This makes a person unpredictable. It also makes a relationship between two people

unpredictable. Every decision the therapist makes is an experiment, in that we cannot know what our influence will be in advance, and we cannot know what our behaviour will mean to the other. Our way of being is our best effort to create and sustain an empathic connection with the client. To sense her moment-to-moment level of functioning and meet her there as a real, whole, interested person. Therefore, there is no such thing as a non-directive intervention in and of itself. There is only a way of 'being with' which creates the possibility of the client experiencing themselves organising differently in the absence of any biased or directing force:

From an existential phenomenological perspective it could be said that non-directivity is the non-directional property of a human being to be, to be aware of his own being and that of the other, in the same instant, in a unique place. Consequently, a reorganisation begins to occur simultaneously, the instant being followed by another instant. This reorganisation belongs to the individual at his own pace and within his own ability of the moment. (Ducroux-Biass, 2005, p.73)

Non-directivity can be observed, interrogated and researched. Assessment of the extent to which the direction of the client-therapist system is emergent can only be done reflectively and must include the phenomenological experiences of therapist and client. This has implications for research methodology, for example, adopting a heuristic method involving both client and therapist, combined with discourse analysis of transcripts over the same period of time.

Conclusion: Non-directivity as the property of the relationship.

Creative emergence in relationship depends upon openness to surprise in the participants. There is (or should be) more 'openness to possibilities' in the therapist-client system than in the client system alone. The more possibilities, the more chaos. There is (or should be) more empathic connection in the therapist-client system than in the client system alone. The more empathic connection, the better the conditions for meaningful organisation in the client system. Thus non-directivity is the property of the

relationship as well as a property of the therapist in the system. It is this relational experience which releases the client from their own stasis (which is a feature of too much order or chaos in a system) and enables them to enter into the dynamics of creative chaos. The nature of the ordering forces that the therapist and client bring into play affect the direction and play of the relationship. If the therapist can sustain balance, i.e. being non-defensive and open to disturbing fluctuations in the client, then new possibilities emerge in the client as consequence of being in and experiencing creative chaos or edge of chaos dynamics.

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