Thoughts on the Greek Crisis and Person-centred Counselling: Crisis, Congruence and Questions Asked[1]

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SYNOPSIS

This paper was presented at a conference of the Greek Association for Counseling in 2011 entitled 'Values in Crisis: Counseling Interventions'. The paper expresses some thoughts concerning the difficulties and challenges facing counsellors, and in particular Person-Centred counsellors, working in Greece during this time of economic and social crisis. Following Rogers' seminal paper addressed to the APA in 1972, I suggest that as counsellors we need to be sensitive to how the crisis affects us. In order to be congruent we need to realise and accept that we too are directly and forcefully implicated in the crisis. As members of this traumatised community we can also become part of the changes needed.

'MAY YOU LIVE IN INTERESTING TIMES': This, as you may know, is reputed to be an ancient Chinese curse. It is the first of three curses of increasing severity. The other two being 'May you come to the attention of those in authority', and finally 'May your wishes come true'. I believe that we, here in Greece, are living the first and possibly suffering the second. The higher powers only know whether and if we live out the third.

Introduction: Some Trends

Social Constructionist views emphasising the plural and relative nature of held realities have become commonplace within the realities of psychology and counselling. There is an easy recognition that we are working in a world confronting us with a profusion of positions and interpretations, through which myriad we are challenged to define our approaches and learn and understand the approaches of our colleagues.

Alongside this understanding, and in contrast to it, has been an increasingly powerful goal- and skills-oriented audit discourse in the West encouraged by socio-political claims for efficiency. This 'culture' arose in the 1980s in the UK and elsewhere in the Western world in response to the increase in public management, the demand for accountability and transparency, and the rise of quality assurance models of organisational control. It has now made its appearance here in Greece. Audit processes

often propose to be neutral acts of verification seemingly universally applicable. Yet, as has often been pointed out, these processes actively shape the design and interpretation of auditable performance (Power, 2000: 114). Little research has been done as to the actual nature and effects of auditing performances on the various institutions and organisations undergoing this process, or how in turn these institutions and organisations shapes the auditing process itself.

Finally, in response to, but also often in line with, a constructionist paradigm and in opposition to the 'audit society', open and holistic concepts and relationship-oriented understandings of human persons have acquired primary importance in various schools of psychology and counselling.

These sometimes contradictory social and political streams have been influencing how we define ourselves as practitioners and have, in turn, defined how we practise.

The Person-Centred Approach

The Person-Centred Approach is no exception. During the 1960s and 1970s the Person-Centred Approach emphasised the Self, and in some instances seemed to portray this Self in opposition to the Social. This limited understanding of Person-Centred theory reflected the radical and subversive events and trends of that period, with the demands for greater individual freedom and the break from social constraints and oppression, as epitomised by the famous feminist slogan 'The Personal is the Political'.

This emphasis on the Self has been questioned and re-addressed by many theorists and practitioners within the Person-Centred community over the past two decades. For example, some practitioners have pointed out that Carl Rogers' theory is at its very basis an organismic theory, viewing the whole of the organism within its environment and the development of that organism and eventually, the self, within and in relation to the environment in which it exists (i.e. Tudor and Worall, 2006). Others have developed the theory of self to include the concept of the edge of awareness and the notion of configurations, in order to allow for a more fluid, processual nature of the self and a more interactive dialogical social being (Mearns and Thorne, 2000). At the very basis of the Person-Centred Approach, as one proponent of a relational person-centred approach holds, is a specific image of the human being:

> According to two different, yet dialectically linked, traditional strands of meaning, the human being is characterized as a person if he or she is denoted in his or her unique individuality, worth and dignity (the substantial notion of being a person), as well as his or her interconnectedness, being-from and being-towards others (relational conception of becoming a person). Thus to be a person describes both autonomy and solidarity, both sovereignty and commitment. (Schmid, 2002: 62)

This balance between individual and social is defined by the continuing process of becoming independent and of developing relationships. At the very centre of the person-centred approach is the construct of 'the actualising tendency' present in every living organism – the tendency to grow, to develop, to realise its full potential (Rogers, 1986/2011: 137). The theory of psychological distress views the client as someone whose actualising tendency has been thwarted because 'the individual *perceives* his *experience* selectively, in terms of the *conditions of worth* which have come to exist in him' (Rogers, 1959/2011: 246). These conditions of worth, or introjected values, though sometimes alien to the organismic valuing process of the individual, are essential to satisfy his/her need for positive regard, a need universal in human beings (ibid.: 245). The individual distorts or denies his/her experience in order to maintain a perceived consistency with the conditions of worth. As the degree of incongruence increases between experiences as lived and experiences as perceived, so too does the anxiety and a sense of alienation increase. As a result, the individual is not able to construct an organised, consistent sense of self. The incongruence between the self and experience, as well as between the person and the environment, including other persons and society, are is central to the understanding of personal suffering (Schmid, 2002).

How, then, is the actualising tendency best nurtured? This tendency develops best in congruent, empathic and accepting relationships. What the counsellor offers is such a relationship; one characterised by congruence, empathy and acceptance, which supports each person's potential to become more fully themselves and more fully present in their relationships with the others, their experiences and their environment as they understand these experiences and others. As is by now commonplace, the counsellor is non-directive, and holds as a philosophically based belief that s/he does not and cannot know in what direction the client wishes to take their personal development, or the relationship. The counsellor, however, in remaining congruent to her/himself and congruent within the relationship, becomes increasingly part of this relationship as it develops. In this secure space and relationship, the client can best work towards a deeper understanding

of him/herself and his/her relationship with his/her environment. In short, at the very centre of person-centred therapy is the concept of relationship, the face-to-face encounter, as well as the personal development of the client and, due to the relationship established, the personal development of the therapist as well.

Crisis and Questions Asked

Yet, is this necessarily detrimental? It might be that like the society we lived in we had become complacent. In Rogers' seminal paper of 1973 he very pointedly asks whether the mental health professions 'can develop a future-oriented, preventive approach or whether it will forever be identified with a past-oriented remedial function' (Rogers, 1973: 381). He challenges mental health professionals to actively involve themselves in the social and cultural crisis of the times, to leave their 'secure little office and work' (ibid.).

Should one chose to take this risk, it seems to me that congruence is central. As a main tenet in the relationship characterising the therapeutic process it is this very congruence which is under threat. There is:

- A sense of urgency to find an understanding of what this crisis means to each one of us, and how we are to understand it.
- This urgency, however, is thwarted. After all, crisis is characterised by transformation, and transformation is often a slow and painful process. We need time to reassess and define our identities and our place in a changing world. Do we have the luxury of time during such an urgent age?
- The old adage 'The personal is the political' has been flipped on its head – for what we are living is an instance where the political (and economic) have become highly personal.
- Though the PC approach espouses equality between client and counsellor, it is the counsellor who is congruent during the session and the client who is incongruent. The counsellor therefore is by the very definition of the process in a more advantageous position. How, then, do we deal with our own incongruence and sense of threat, which inevitably seep into the sessions? Are we now more equal with our clients, similarly lost in the chaos that surrounds and affects us, and what does that mean in terms of the changing dynamics of the relationship?
- And if we do find a narrative which explains and makes sense of the events occurring around and to us, how threatened are we by the often different narratives of our clients concerning those same events? How important have our narratives become to us, and how fragile are our own explanations in light of the constantly shifting events?

How much more imperative is it for us to be aware of our 'interesting times', and of ourselves and our own place within them. It is no longer a luxury to regard and take note of the social as we work with clients. It is no longer just one more aspect of which we should be aware. The social, the political and the economic have intruded violently into our private lives as forces well beyond our control. Many givens no longer exist. Uncertainty is a much more certain quality than ever before.

Since this uncertainty cannot be avoided, it might be best to recognise it as part of who we are at this moment. If, as counsellors and psychotherapists, we can be aware of how threatened we might feel and how uncertain, then at least we come into our relationships with our clients a little more congruent, a little more self-aware. We are called upon, and I believe it is part of our job, to be participant observers. No longer simply empathic witnesses, we are participants, heart and soul, in this traumatised community. Yet we are also called upon to stand as observers of ourselves and others; to attempt a wider, more encompassing perspective as we struggle to make sense of our lives. In this sense we may also become part of a process of change, creating what was for Rogers a new science:

> It is to be noted that in all of these trends toward a newer science we do not push the individual into some contrived situation to investigate some hypothesis we have imposed on him. We are instead opening our minds and our whole selves to learning *from* him.
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> (ibid.: 380, original italics)

By entering truthfully into the crisis of which we are a part, we become open to learning from our clients as they, too, deal with similar questions, similar insecurities. Paraphrasing Rogers, our task can no longer be to assuage the pain of our clients for whom failure has become a daily experience, for it is often our own experience as well. Nor can we be content with attempts to diagnose and remedy individual ills created by an obsolete and irrelevant system. Instead, through our work with our clients, by asking and facing up to the very questions they too are asking, we might just become part of a broader task of creating a more humane society.

One last and related point: it is, I feel, vital to find those basic values by which each one of us in the end defines him- or herself as human; those very basic existential values which, if betrayed, would cost us our sense of being, our sense of pride and self-worth. In times such as these,

survival takes first order. The question is how we define this survival. What, in the end, will we wish for as individuals and as members of a wider community?

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