

The Essence of Psychotherapy: A Review and Reflections

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Abstract

In response to the theme of this special issue of the journal, and utilising a specific literature review, this article offers some comments and reflections on the essence of psychotherapy, and also considers the problem of essentialism.

Waitara

He kauparetanga ki te matū o tēnei whakaputanga motuhake o te hautaka, me te whakamahi i te arotakenga tuinga mātua, ka horaina atu i tēnei tuinga ētahi whakaaro, hokinga whakaaro mai i te iho o te whakaora hinengaro me te kōhuki i te āhua o te whakawai.

Essence and Essentialism

From the time in April 2013 that members of the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists (NZAP) were introduced to the theme of the 2014 Conference, “The Essence” (of psychotherapy), I began to reflect on what I — and others — think is the essence of what we do. During the rest of that year, various announcements were made about the Conference (on the NZAP website and in the *Newsletter*), introducing another theme: [the] life and death of the psychotherapist, as well as a stimulating question: “What is enlivening and what is deadening in our work”, and, finally, a strapline, “Holding the Space” which, I assumed, referred to the principle method of the Conference of holding and facilitating group space.

When we refer to the essence of something, we are generally trying to define or distil the nature of the thing, or to get to the heart of the matter. Thus, in response to the question, “What is the essence of psychotherapy”, we may, for instance, define psychotherapy as “soul healing” (from the Greek *psyche* meaning soul and *terapeia* meaning healing). We may say that in psychotherapy our emphasis or focus is on insight, adjustment, change, or liberation; we may say that we interpret, direct, empathise with,

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help, or facilitate the people with whom we work — and refer to them variously as patients, clients or customers. We may work with individuals or couples, with groups, families, whanau, teams, or organisations — at which point some may say that this is no longer psychotherapy. We may work briefly, aiming for cure in one session, or we may define psychotherapy as necessarily — and thus essentially — long-term. We may also define psychotherapy as encompassing psychoanalysis and counselling, or we may make sharp distinctions between psychoanalysis (and, for that matter, psycho-analysis), psychotherapy, counselling, clinical psychology, and counselling psychology. Indeed, in a world where there are such distinctions, we may well think that it behoves us to be able to define what we do, especially alongside other health care provision and practice. In this context, discussing in this sense the “essence” of what we do, and being able to distinguish it from other activities, is useful — if not essential!

Beyond this common usage, however, there is a problem in defining or in trying to define the essence of something, which is that, in doing so, we fall into essentialism, that is, the view that for any entity, such as an animal, a group of people, a physical object, a concept, or an activity such as psychotherapy, there is a “natural” or given attribute that is necessary to its identity and/or function, and that, therefore, is in some way fixed.

In Western thought, essentialism derives from the work of the Greek philosophers Plato (c. 426-347 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE). Plato proposed that all known things and concepts have an essential reality as it were “behind” them, an “Idea” or “Form”, a philosophy that is referred to as Platonic idealism. Aristotle developed this line of reasoning by proposing that all objects are the objects they are by virtue of their substance, which makes the object what it is. This is the origin of the debate regarding nature and (or versus) nurture. The idea that we have a specific personality or certain disposition, temperament, character, characteristics, or traits, is, of course, a view that has influenced psychiatric and psychotherapeutic thinking about the self, personality, and personality disorder. Even Winnicott’s (1960) concept of the “True Self”, a capitalised and, arguably, reified self, that is based on spontaneous, authentic experience, suggests something essentially “true” about that experience — and the (consequent) structure of the personality.

These essentialist perspectives are closely allied to foundationalism, the idea that there are basic concepts, beliefs or structures that underpin others — and, ultimately, to the infallibility of the most basic concepts or beliefs such as the “True Self”, the “Inner Child” or human “nature”.

There are a number of counter arguments to essentialism. One dates back to Plato’s time, during which Socrates (470-399 BCE) was critical of the nature of “form” and the Idea, arguing that Beauty and Justice were different forms from, say, hair, mud, and dirt. In more recent times, the work of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) challenged biological essentialism which had been the basis of biological taxonomies based on foundationalism. Similarly, in the last 50 years, feminism has challenged the notion that men and women are essentially different, i.e., different in essence; and race and cultural studies have similarly challenged the construction of different categories for different races. The idea of an unchanging and unchangeable human nature has been critiqued by critical thinkers such as Karl Marx and Martin Heidegger, existentialists such as Søren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre, and constructivists such as Frederik Barth and Stuart Hall.

Literature Review

In response to the main theme of the Conference and this special, themed issue of the journal, and out of a curiosity about the psychotherapeutic literature on “essence”, I decided to conduct a specific literature review on the subject. I consulted the Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP) database and searched “essence of psychotherapy” in all years (i.e., 1871-2015), all languages, and all types of publications (i.e., the abstract of an article, the article itself, etc.), a search that, perhaps surprisingly, yielded only 18 results. Having read each reference and its context in the respective article, I then excluded seven references that either did not define the essence of psychotherapy or made only a brief reference to it in a vague or generalised way, exclusions which reduced the final number of references in this database to 11. This article reports these results and offers a brief commentary on them. Incidentally, a search in the same database for “life of the psychotherapist” returned only eight references, and “death of the psychotherapist” no references at all.

Whilst I restricted this literature review to the principal database for psychoanalytic psychotherapy, mainly in acknowledgement of the predominant theoretical orientation of the Conference Organising Group and, therefore, that which influenced the thinking about and organisation of the Conference, I did find one reference to the essence of psychotherapy in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (1961-2014) in an article by Rāban-Motounu (2014) in which she equated the essence of psychotherapy with unification:

The essence of psychotherapy of unification is to reconnect the person with her inner Self, to increase self-acceptance, and to activate and creatively use her resources in order to overcome the existential challenges she encounters, all while searching for the sense of the symptom, the disorder, or the difficulty that limits her evolution. (pp. 280-281)

The reference to unification and reconnection to an “inner Self”, akin to the literature on the inner (or Inner) Child, implies that there is a true or core foundation to the self/Self.

The Essence(s) of Psychotherapy

In the earliest reference in the PEP database, Dicks (1951) viewed the essence of psychotherapy “in the restoration of the sense of security for the expression of emotional needs of any given individual” (cited by Stengel, 1951, p. 328).

In his book on *Decision Therapy*, Greenwald (1973), a (then) practicing psychoanalyst, and past President of the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis, declared that the essence of psychotherapy was not free association, analysis of the transference, or dream interpretation, but (rather) the helping of the client to make a decision to change. As he noted:

the only thing that happens in therapy — regardless of the methods or techniques used — is that the person you’re working with is helped to make a *decision to change*, and then is helped to carry out the decision. According to Greenwald even

the most difficult problems — [including] ... addiction to drugs, and various forms of compulsive or destructive behaviour — respond remarkably favorably to this kind of therapy, once a *wish* to change has led to a *decision* to change. (cited by Ellis, 1974, p. 486)

This is a particularly interesting finding as it reports a psychoanalyst apparently shifting from an analytic to a more actionistic perspective on and in therapy.

In a report on two symposia held on the topic of psychotherapy, in Prague, Czechoslovakia (in March 1973), and in Komorov, Poland (May 1976), Jagoda (1978) cited a paper presented by two Polish psychiatrists (Leder and Mellibruda) who saw the essence of psychotherapy as the communication between the therapist and patient. Jagoda commented:

The aim is to provide information which could result in achieving beneficial changes in the subjective and objective states of the patient. Giving information to the patient is defined as providing a viewpoint which includes an explanation of the causation of the illness, the mechanisms of its origin and the methods for eliminating the disturbances. Psychotherapy is supposed to satisfy the patient's need for emotional contact and to influence his thought processes, emotions and behavior. (p. 478)

In terms of Stark's (1999) taxonomy, I would suggest that the emphasis here, both on the provision of information and on the patient's need for emotional contact, which echoes Alexander and French's (1946) concept of the "corrective emotional experience", represents a "one-and-a-half person psychology" whereby the therapist provides, corrects, gives, or satisfies something for and in the patient/client.

Commenting on his experience of working as a co-therapist in a psychotherapy group with W.G. Joffe, Pedder (1989) recalled how this gave him

the chance to observe his unique capacity to hold patients up with one hand and punch them hard with the other, combining his warm friendly humanity with shrewd analytic insights, a subtle blend of feminine and masculine traits which I think is an essence of psychotherapy. (p. 49)

The idea that human beings have feminine and masculine traits is, of course, an essentialist one, and it is interesting that Pedder (1989) ascribed "warm friendly humanity" to the feminine, and "shrewd analytic insights" with the masculine. Whether we take a stereotypical, archetypal, or constructivist view of what is "feminine" and "masculine", we can accept that a certain range and balance of qualities (if not traits) is useful for the therapist — and for his or her clients. The question is whether therapeutic qualities, such as contactfulness, authenticity, warmth, empathy, creativity, curiosity, reflexivity, authority, etc., are themselves feminine, masculine, or neutral — and, of course, in many languages other than English, these words take a feminine, masculine or neuter case.

In an article, entitled “How Analytic is Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy?” Richard-Jodoin (1991) proposed that the essence of psychotherapy

is to help a person acknowledge and eventually integrate dissociated, but alternatively conscious, aspects of the self and of the object — not to lift repression — and to understand the present in terms of the consciously accessible past — not of the unconscious. (p. 347)

This is interesting in two respects. The first is the reference to integration, which, historically, is more associated with the work of ego psychologists (Paul Federn, Eduardo Weiss, Heinz Hartmann, Edward Glover) and humanistic psychologists and therapists (such as John Norcross, Martin Goldfried, Richard Erskine, and Petrůska Clarkson), for a discussion of which see Tudor and Summers (2014). Writing about the nature of psychotherapy, Rogers (1942) summarised it thus:

It aims directly towards the greatest independence and integration of the individual.... The aim is not to solve one particular problem, but to assist the individual to grow, so that he can cope with the present problem and later problems in a better-integrated fashion. (p. 28)

The second point of interest is Richard-Jodoin’s (1991) reference to the present and the importance of the conscious in accessing the past. This has been the subject of more recent work by Stern (2004) in which he described the present moment as “a temporal contour along which the experience forms during its unfolding” (p. 219). For Stern the present moment comprises: (1) the “now moment,” an emerging, interpersonal process, which is unpredictable and uncertain, which illustrates both the therapist-client dyad as well as the client’s original family parent-child dyad; and (2) the moment of meeting or encounter, which alters the emerging relationship and leads to moments of movement (see Tudor 2011; Tudor & Summer, 2014).

Reminding us of the centrality of speech to Breuer and Freud’s (1895/1955) *Studies on Hysteria* and citing the work of the textual critic David Krell (1991), Scott (1995) summarised his view of the essence of psychotherapy as the countermanding of somatic conversion:

if unremembered reminiscences yield the somatic symptom, then reminiscences remembered dissolve it ... The spoken word — much more than a sign signifying a signified — reasserts its rights in the domain of the symbolic: symptoms or “symbols of remembrance” are disbanded and the reminiscences behind them reappropriated as memories proper. *The latter, no longer dissociated, are brought home.* They can now be corrected by means of a kind of dialogue with one another, in which each remembrance understands itself as a perspective, as one associated with others. (Krell, 1991, p. 109, Scott’s emphasis)

Krell's reference to the somatic reflects something of the resurgence of interest in the body in contemporary psychotherapy across all the old "forces" of psychology: psychoanalysis, behaviourism, and humanistic psychology.

Holmes (1997) suggested that "it is the variety and uniqueness of [presented] experience [that] is the essence of psychotherapy" (p. 164), and, in a subsequent article, commenting on the life and work of Charles Rycroft (1914-1998), stated that, for him (Rycroft), "the essence of psychotherapy was the search for meaning — but one informed by biology" (Holmes, 1997, p. 101). Holmes went on to comment that Rycroft "resisted the idea of the analyst as a detached observer, and emphasised the relationship between therapist and patient as the crucial curative element. He saw creativity and the use of symbolism as universal" (ibid., p. 101). The idea that psychotherapy is a search for meaning goes back, at least, to Viktor Frankl's (1946) famous work, *Man's Search for Meaning*, a book that led to the development of logotherapy and influenced especially humanistic psychotherapies.

Inspired by Milner's (1969) assertion that "The patient tells us his Truth so that we may tell him the Metatruth" (p. xxvi), Levenson (2003) referred to the essence of psychotherapy and, in doing so, made an interesting distinction between psychotherapy and psychoanalysis:

It is very difficult to acquire and sustain the discipline necessary to stay below the horizon, to pressure a deconstructive inquiry. Most neophyte psychoanalysts have done a good deal of psychotherapy before they undertook psychoanalytic training. The very human impulse to help, to clarify, to make sense of what one is hearing that is the essence of *psychotherapy*, becomes, as Freud pointed out, counterproductive therapeutic ambition in *psychoanalysis*. (p. 241)

This passage not only defines in part the classical distinction between psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, but also names the essence of psychotherapy as helping, clarifying, and making sense.

Most recently, in an article on an evolutionary neuropsychanalytic perspective, in which he cited the work of Fonagy and his colleagues (Fonagy, & Target, 1996; Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002), Brickman (2008) suggested that, in the rekindling of mentalisation, "we witness a prominent contemporary analytic author defining the essence of psychotherapy as enhancing an evolutionary function" (p. 330). He continued:

This emphasis seems to imply that corrective emotional experience (Alexander & French, 1946) and attention to the patient's impressions of the therapist's thoughts and feelings (Hoffman, 1983) can ameliorate mentalization difficulties, thereby facilitating good psychotherapeutic outcomes. Reasonably inferring the intentions of others is of distinct survival value in humans and other primates whose eventual reproductive possibilities hinge on effective relationships. (ibid., p. 330)

Mentalisation refers to the ability to understand the mental state not only of ourselves but also of others, and is commonly summarised as being able to hold the mind in

mind. It is an imaginative mental activity, and a social one. Whilst the theory of mind on which mentalisation is based dates back at least to the work of the 17th century French philosopher, René Descartes (1596-1650), the concept of mentalisation only emerged in psychoanalytic literature in the late 1960s and, more recently, has been popularised in the profession by the work of Peter Fonagy and his colleagues, especially with regard to developmental psychopathology. The argument here is that mentalisation is important in attachment and development, and that a psychotherapy that is informed by mentalisation can help clients become more aware of others, which is a personal, social, and evolutionary project.

Reflections

The first thing that strikes me about this specific literature review is the number of accounts — six out of the eleven — which are reports of what other authors have said about the essence of psychotherapy. This suggests that authors may be more willing to cite and interpret what others have said than to state something definite themselves about the essence of psychotherapy, which, in turn, may reflect a certain ambivalence about the concept of the — or even an — essence to psychotherapy, as well as possibly an intellectual disagreement about the notion of essence and its basis in essentialism.

Secondly, I suggest that these various definitions of the essence of psychotherapy describe a starting point to psychotherapy, and ideas about the outcome and process of psychotherapy, as well as about certain therapist attributes or qualities (see Table 1).

I suggest that this is a useful analysis of the definitions and concerns that emerged from this particular literature search in relation to different aspects of psychotherapy. The analysis and clustering links the present specific enquiry to the broader psychotherapy literature — regarding assumptions, outcomes, process, and the therapist — all of which in some way defines or tries to define psychotherapy and *de facto* defines its “essence”.

Thirdly, whilst there is perhaps something comforting about trying to define or distil the essence of a thing, I suggest that, ultimately, it is a search for fool’s gold. Safran (2002) put this well when he wrote that: “It would be foolish to think that the essence of psychotherapy could ever be captured in a reductive fashion” (p. 243). He went on to contrast this with what he identified as a tremendous ferment within the psychotherapy research community that recognises both “the limitations of the traditional research paradigm ... and the importance of both epistemological and methodological pluralism” (p. 243). Following Safran, I would suggest that our energies are better placed in dealing with our own anxieties — as well as those of our patients or clients — in facing the complexities and limits of life, and the reality of pluralism and plural understandings of life, including psychotherapy, its contents and discontents.

TABLE 1. A SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE IN THE PEP DATABASE ON THE ESSENCE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

FOCUS	SUMMARY	AUTHOR(S)
ON THE STARTING POINT	The variety and uniqueness of experience, as presented by patients	Holmes (1997)
ON OUTCOME	The restoration of the sense of security for the expression of emotional needs	Dicks (1947)
	Helping the client to make a decision to change	Greenwald (1973)
	As enhancing an evolutionary function	Brickman (2008)
ON PROCESS	Helping the client to make a decision to change	Greenwald (1973)
	The communication between the therapist and patient	Leder & Mellibruda in Jagoda (1978)
	The countermanding of somatic conversion	Krell (1991)
	To help a person acknowledge and eventually integrate dissociated, but alternatively conscious, aspects of the self and of the object	Richard-Jodoin (1991)
	The search for meaning	Rycroft in Holmes (1998)
	To help, to clarify, to make sense of what one is hearing	Levenson (2003)
	As enhancing an evolutionary function	Brickman (2008)
ON THERAPIST ATTRIBUTES OR QUALITIES	The capacity to hold patients up with one hand and punch them hard with the other, friendly humanity with shrewd analytic insights, a subtle blend of feminine and masculine traits	Joffe, as described in Pedder (1989)

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