

BOOK REVIEW

ROGERS AND OUT

Encountering Feminism: Intersections between Feminism and the Person-Centred Approach. Edited by Gillian Proctor and Mary Beth Napier. Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire: PCCS Books, 2004; 246 pp, £17.00 pb.

Carl Rogers Counsels a Black Client: Race and Culture in Person-Centred Counselling. Edited by Roy Moodley, Colin Lago, and Anissa Talahite. Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire: PCCS Books, 2004; 294 pp, £17.00 pb.

Carl Rogers' legacy is an important one, and one with which both of the books reviewed here must come to terms. As the founder of the person-centred approach (hereafter PCA), Rogers was known for his 'democratic' therapeutic process; PCA emphasizes the client's autonomy and capacity for resolving his/her own distress in a nurturing, but 'non-directive' relationship with the therapist. Rogers' key concepts of 'unconditional positive regard', 'empathic understanding', and 'congruence' are explored and scrutinized in both these volumes. Both acknowledge their debt to Rogers while remaining clear-eyed about the limitations of his approach in situations where gender or ethnicity is involved in the client's suffering. As both volumes show, PCA has been both highly influential, and deeply problematic, for feminist and multicultural approaches to therapy.

The essays in *Encountering Feminism* consider a variety of topics, including the importance of feminist activism, the place

of spirituality in PCA, psychiatric responses to sexual abuse, pedagogical questions, and the role of men in feminist practice. The book's four sections all offer explorations into the practice of both PCA and feminist therapy. After a section containing useful introductions to both, the second section comprises a number of personal reflections on the tensions and intersections between them. Here Gillian Proctor's interview with Maureen O'Hara yields many important insights. O'Hara suggests a way of reconciling a relational concept of self with what is sometimes seen as the solipsistic individualism inherent in PCA: 'to be self-healing doesn't mean that you do it by yourself. It simply means that you are the architect or the author of your healing story, but it doesn't mean that the story is a single person story' (p. 63). She also calls for 'social theory that doesn't reduce everything to social forces but can hold multiple perspectives in mind and can account for the relationships among levels of organisation' (p. 67).

The third section offers a collection of theoretical excursions; most powerful among them, for me, was Clare Shaw's harrowing and thought-provoking account of her own experiences with PCA. What the abused woman needs from therapy, in part, is an 'opportunity to locate her experiences within the wider social and political context of her life'; as a consequence, for Shaw, the efficacy of PCA is restricted by its 'limited, individualised understanding of abuse' (p. 150). Her contribution ends with a number of provocative questions about incongru-

ence. 'Is it not possible', she asks, 'that an abused woman's distress displays congruence with her experience, which was humiliating, frightening, and brought about a change in her concept of self . . .? Is it not possible that to remain undistressed by these experiences and the realisations that they involve would actually be indicative of greater psychological denial?' She also questions the notion that individual therapy has more to offer clients than social activism (their own and others') does: 'Is it not psychological maladjustment to fail to acknowledge what is going on around us? And how much is a PC therapist perpetuating this denial by having therapy with individual women and not working towards changing society?' (p. 151).

This section offers instructive critiques of both feminist therapy and PCA, with the essays weighting the attributes of each differently. The three essays in the final section discuss feminist/PCA practice and case studies. These essays emphasize, in Sophie Smailes' words, the 'need to be flexible and responsive with both approaches, using them together but always giving the centre stage to the client's therapeutic process' (p. 218). Speaking for many of the contributors, Monica Hill locates, at the heart of feminist practice, 'a commitment to work with both commonality and difference' because 'without acknowledgement of difference, whole groups of women are marginalised and any hope of real equality is lost' (p. 222).

This is 'the first attempt to bring together the two bodies of knowledge . . . in the hope that each will be mutually enhanced' (p. 11). Indeed it is so admirable a volume that I was perplexed by many contributors' acceptance and promotion of a certain kind of received account of how gender functions in therapy. According to this account, men conceive of the self as 'autonomous' while women see themselves as existing in relation to other

people. Peter Schmid is one of the few to question this kind of thinking (p. 181), which seems to me both essentialist and Eurocentric. As Susan James and Gary Foster point out in *Carl Rogers Counsels a Black Client*, clients from collectivist societies might find the idea of 'being in touch with oneself' foreign, as many would 'find it selfish to spend so much therapy time focusing on themselves' (p. 203). Surely, in many societies, men as well as women would define themselves relationally? In their introduction the editors regret the lack of representation from women of colour and working-class women, and indeed there were many times when I felt that this volume suffered from the absence of these voices. Much could have been gained through greater consideration of the theory and practice of multicultural therapy.

In *Carl Rogers Counsels a Black Client* a number of therapists with experience of both PCA and multicultural therapy respond to the 'The Right to Be Desperate' and 'On Anger and Hurt', demonstration interviews filmed in the 1970s between Rogers and a young, unnamed black client. Rogers' client linked his struggle with leukaemia (from which he was in remission at the time of the interviews) to the racism he had encountered throughout his life. Many of the contributors find Rogers' responses inadequate, in different respects, to the task before him. Rogers was white; moreover, he was the founder of a form of therapy which emphasized the individual's agency and autonomy rather than the powerful social forces which are highly influential, if not formative, in the self's development. For these reasons, many of the contributors argue, Rogers was unable to fully help his client. As a number of them point out, PCA was not 'culture-free' but was the outgrowth of a 'philosophical tradition that evolved from secular and democratic societies in the West' (p. 103) – a

tradition that had been involved in justifying and propagating the atrocities of slavery and colonial subjugation. Thus PCA is itself implicated in the very conditions that contributed to the client's distress.

In analysing the sessions, many of the book's contributors wrestle with such questions as: Is Rogers' method truly non-directive? How might Rogers have responded differently to the client and his frequent references to racism and how it has affected him physically and psychologically? What are the ethical questions involved in the production and dissemination (and continued use) of these films? How was Rogers' method with the unnamed client different from his method with other black clients (Dadisi, Dione, etc.) on other occasions? Should we take these films as representative, or was there something about this particular therapist–client relationship that inhibited congruence?

There are some delightfully instructive close analyses. For example, Catrin Rhys et al. describe Rogers' use of 'mm hmm' both as a 'continuer' and a 'non-continuer' (arguing that even this most apparently innocuous of interventions is 'directive' at times), and Gella Richards proposes the client's use of African-American words such as 'tripping' as a site of some missed opportunities for analysis (Rogers as a white American would have overlooked the nuances to which Richards is so attuned – unfortunately this section is very short; I wish Richards had said more). In a fascinating contribution, Germain Lietaer usefully and painstakingly constructs a taxonomy of the types of responses Rogers makes to his

client. Like *Encountering Feminism*, *Carl Rogers* is sensibly organized into sections discussing questions of theory and practice, and offering personal reflections. It also contains some source documents, and attempts to incorporate perspectives from other disciplines (i.e., narrative analysis, humanism, hermeneutics, etc.). Feminism makes an appearance, thanks to Christine Clarke, and there are provocative suggestions for how we might make useful excursions into philosophical questions to do with universalism, power, and 'culture'.

If there is a fault with the volume, it stems from the editors' generosity to their contributors; in a valiant attempt to allow as many voices as possible to be heard, they sometimes include too much, or allow the same points to be made, in different ways, too many times. Nonetheless this volume is a considerable achievement, and although we should not have to be grateful that books such as *Carl Rogers Counsels a Black Client* and *Encountering Feminism* have found a publisher, it is certainly encouraging that they have. I was haunted, in the final chapter of *Carl Rogers*, by the information that in the 1980s the RACE (Race Awareness in Counselling Education) committee had put together a volume on multicultural counselling but had found that it was 'not possible to obtain a publishing contract for this venture' (p. 264). Thank you to the contributors, editors, and to PCCS books, for making these very useful and important resources available to us.

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