

# Which Psychotherapies? Which Politics? An Equalising Perspective

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**ABSTRACT** *This article discusses Schmid's lead article, and takes issue with it on a number of points: (1) that the psychotherapy Schmid refers to is too specific; (2) that the politics he refers to is not specific enough, or explicitly progressive or equalising; (3) that the person-centred approach is not more "political" than other approaches or modalities; and (4) that, if there is to be a dialogue between approaches or modalities, then there needs to be more emphasis on the common ground between them. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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I have never aligned myself personally with any school of psychotherapy, though the training I have both received and given have included a wide range of approaches. The Serpent Institute that I co-founded with John Rowan in 1988 trained psychotherapists and counsellors in psychodynamic and humanistic traditions, within a framework of natural spirituality. I also taught and still supervise on the Mary Ward Integrative Counselling Diploma course, based on Petruska Clarkson's (1990, 1995) relationship model. My first book, *Feminist Counselling in Action* (Chaplin, 1989/1999), focused on the cognitive aspects of therapy, contrasting hierarchical mind sets with rhythmic, equalising ones. I also have strong connections with Jungian approaches through art, spirituality and dream work. I should add that I have also been involved in the person-centred world where, in terms of my particular personality and philosophy, I feel most at home. However, I am also painfully aware of the complex unconscious processes that can underlie even the apparently more equal relationship between client and counsellor. Much of my present supervision work involves exploring countertransference and other psychodynamic insights, so I feel able to share my tentative thoughts on the field as a whole without needing to advocate one school or another.

Politically I describe myself as a feminist and anarchist. At times even these labels are limiting as I believe in the dance of multi-identities. It all depends on the context, so defining myself this way here feels appropriate. Years in the women's movement, raising both consciousness and unconsciousness, have helped my awareness of how the "personal is political" – and the political is personal, but I have learnt most from actual activism.

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## **POLITICS GENERALISED TO ANY COMMUNITY**

Schmid's paper (Schmid, 2012/2014) does open up and deepen the meaning of the word "politics". In everyday language it usually conjures up something to do with governments, voting and political parties. For many it is a dirty word, evoking corruption, hypocrisy and subservience to the market. For others it is generalised to describe all relationships between people involving power, negotiating power, distributing power and even "empowering" individuals, or it could be generalised further and describe all aspects of arranging community life. Schmid quotes Aristotle's view of humans as "reliant on civic community by nature". However, it is not clear what kind of community this quotation refers to. It could be about a village made up of patriarchal families ruled by a head man. This is a community, but it is not one that is empowering for women. A prison is a community, but the prisoners are at the bottom of a dominating hierarchy, and that is apart from the little hierarchies that form between the prisoners themselves. There can be a romantic idea about the word "community" implying a warm togetherness, a belonging and a security that may not actually be felt by all its members. There can even be an assumption, or at least a hope, that members will respect each other equally. Many psychotherapists and counsellors want communities to be places where the potential of all individuals will be realised; it's not about wanting us all to be the same, but, rather, desire a place where our differences are valued and developed, and in which the work of therapy can be supported.

Anthropologists and archaeologists will tell us that over the 200,000 years of existence of *Homo sapiens* humans have devised thousands of ways of living together in communities, but generalisations, even about a particular period, such as the Neolithic, or an economic style, such as hunter-gatherers, are scientifically problematic. Scholars are looking at these from their own perspective of time, place and culture. So here, like Schmid, I am looking at the issue of politics (polis) and community from a psychotherapeutic framework in 2014 in the West. Thus therapists need to explore what kind of community, with what kind of politics, creates the most helpful environment for psychotherapeutic individuation, actualisation, growth, transformation and so on. If they have an idea of human nature that is flexible and thrives best in more equal societies, then this needs to be included in our analysis, activity and activism. When Schmid relates politics to our image of the human being (p. 1 & 4), he needs to be more explicit. He refers to the ancient Greek ideal of the common good as the goal, but in Ancient Greece women and slaves certainly weren't included in that goal. On this Schmid's article seems to lack a clear progressive/equalising perspective.

## **OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM IN HUMAN NATURE**

Schmid's article seems to imply that by using the person-centred approach of respect and non-domination of the client we are being political – in the sense of democracy and emancipation. This requires a very optimistic view of human nature and is one reason why I feel it is vital to include and respect other psychotherapeutic approaches. Years ago, I used to teach my students a simplistic division between humanistic therapies, which have an optimistic view of human nature, and psychodynamic therapies, which have a pessimistic view. Humanistic therapies and therapists seemed to be saying that underneath, at our core, we are naturally wise and loving, and that we only respond with anger or pain in appropriate situations: our biological organism

has a natural self-regulating, developing capacity, and that when the right conditions – which include the right community – are present, the person will fulfil their potential. By contrast, psychodynamic therapies and therapists seemed to saying that, from birth, we develop psychological patterns, often defences against pain that are so deeply buried in our unconscious that even good external conditions don't easily heal them. Wilhelm Reich (1970) brought these perspectives together by acknowledging how strong defences are, but, at the same time, asserting a belief in a positive core that is loving and only rationally hating when there is injustice or cruelty. In a sense he combined humanistic and psychodynamic approaches in his model of the core being covered up by a secondary layer of defences.

Reich was a Marxist and many if not most psychotherapists interested in politics come from the Left, even though this is more often implicit than explicit. This is not mentioned in Schmid's paper. Perhaps it needs to be acknowledged more clearly as, with this political stance, comes a belief in the changeability of human behaviour, mind-sets and feelings, as opposed to the more Right-wing assumption that our nature is given and/or fixed.

Many therapists share the view about human nature that we benefit from more equal relationships, and when we are being respected, rather than dominated or controlled. In this view, the therapist as expert is challenged. These therapists talk about power “with” rather than power “over”. Some psychotherapists are still traditional Marxists, while others might call themselves social democrats, socialists, anarchists or liberals. This labelling through macro politics may seem a far cry from the consulting room, but we are all also part of the wider (political) world. It appears that our political beliefs do affect our ideas about human nature and, in turn, how we work as therapists. The old Left-wing political ideas of the perfectability of human beings through state communism no longer inspire most of those Left-wing therapists. They understand much more about the unconscious and our human complexity. Perhaps they are even more pessimistic today about our ability as a species to change, as this needs to happen at such a deep level that the task feels enormous. As Mary Jayne Rust (2006) put it: “The work of Psychotherapy is dedicated to deep change. Can we use our skills to help illuminate our collective crisis and strengthen the sea change in our attitudes and lifestyles?” (p. 44).

The mind-set of endless progress is also being questioned more and more. Perfectionism is often seen as a problem for individual psychologies, and was also a problematic aspect of most of the idealism of 20th-century Common Era (CE), from socialism to feminism. We all had our utopias, but it is hard to know what to put in place of these old ideals. Schmid seems to imply that person-centred therapy is some kind of solution, but without the addition of a belief in equality it must be limited.

## **EQUALITY AS A SHARED VALUE**

Currently, there seems to be a global crisis in the very idea of democratic politics. The thought of the United States charging around the world spreading democracy is both laughable and horrifying, and yet there seems to be an increasing concern about the obscene inequalities everywhere – concerns even expressed at the World Economic Forum, held in Davos, Switzerland, in January of this year. Equality as a shared value may be back on the agenda, not in the same form as in the past (for example, through state communism), but perhaps more as a shared value applicable on many levels from the global to the personal.

In the world-wide Occupy movement the belief in equality is expressed as the contrast between the 1% of people who own most of the wealth of the world and the other 99% who do not. It was – and is – a powerful symbol of extreme inequality regardless of the complexity or actual statistics. The message spoke to millions. In his book *Direct Democracy* David Graeber (2012) has written thoughtfully about the new ways activists are thinking and organising. Being anti-hierarchy is a crucial feature of the communities that grew up around the protests all over the world in 2011 onwards; permanent leadership is discouraged, although at times spokespeople take a temporary role. This value system is, of course, familiar to anarchists from the 19th century onwards: to feminists of the 1960s and 1970s, to the Green movement, and to many other groups, including therapists in the humanistic tradition. For others, even the word “democracy” is problematic as it implies “rule” of the majority; the idea of ruling is still present. In the people’s assemblies of the Occupy movement decisions were made through consensus (see Land, 2012). This can, of course, be time-consuming and problematic in other ways, such as dealing with disruption by non-conforming individuals, but the value of listening to and including everyone is at the heart of their politics: equality is the central value. It is from this perspective that I read Schmid’s paper. The specific kind of politics in which I am personally interested as a psychotherapist is that which promotes equality in all its complexity. This could have a label such as anarchist or leftist but I prefer a new one: “equalist”. On the other hand, it could have no label at all. I had hoped that Schmid would have been more specific about his politics.

Rather than being viewed as a utopian ideal to be achieved in the future, equality can be seen as a continuous process. It is not a static state to which we aspire; it is not a final perfection of either human beings or human societies. It can involve power struggles between individuals or groups but it is not limited to these. It does not imply sameness as in the “equality feminism” that Germaine Greer (1999) describes with contempt. It does not have to be limited to equal rights or equal pay, important though these are. In my book, *Deep Equality*, I described equalising as “processes that go on in complex interrelated ways at all levels of personal, social and environmental life” (Chaplin, 2008a, p. 23). In nature it can be described as the rhythmic balancing force that underlies everything.

Equalising rhythms are the opposite of hierarchies. There are no permanent tops and bottoms, winners or losers. They are fluid and multidimensional, and fit better with the way the new politics of the streets are actually acted out, for example, with rotating leadership. Nevertheless, the old models also operate very powerfully in our unconscious minds even while we are consciously trying to be equal. Hierarchies and equalising rhythms can be seen as two different mindsets that we all have. Every day, people act and think with the old hierarchical paradigm and the new equalising one. They are sometimes almost simultaneous, sometimes in conflict and often unconscious. When people put a celebrity on a pedestal or look down on someone who is different, they are in the old hierarchic mode. When people look at another in the eye as an equal human being with respect, they are using the new equalising model. After 5000 years of hierarchical thinking it is not surprising how deeply ingrained it is.

## **POLITICS IN THE THERAPY ROOM**

Carl Rogers wrote very specifically that in the person-centred approach there is a “*conscious* avoidance by the therapist of all control over or decision-making for the client” (Rogers, 1977, p. 14; my emphasis) This is a strongly anti-hierarchical, equalising stand. There can,

however, in this approach and in the therapeutic relationship be a myriad of unconscious factors. These can range from personal, often family-related issues, expressed in transference onto the therapist, to social factors such as internalised class hierarchies. A therapist might be very keen to feel equal and respectful but there are likely to be hidden factors present in the room from society's inequalities. A woman client may feel consciously equal to a male therapist, but they each have thousands of years of patriarchal conditioning underneath their relationship. A white therapist may have done a lot of work on unconscious racism but still have stereotypes in mind. We all have much more work to do on all "diversity issues", as they are now widely known. These are always connected to power and politics in that certain groups have more power in society and tend to control the norms. The word "diversity" can, however, imply a level playing field and does not include terms like inequality or hierarchy. The problem is often not difference itself, but differences that involve inferiority and superiority and the power inequalities that follow. As Nick Totton has pointed out, it can be problematic to deny or ignore power differences in therapy:

Instead of trying hopelessly to eliminate power struggle from the therapeutic relationship, we place it dead centre, highlighting the battle between therapist and client over the definition of reality, baring it to the naked gaze and making it a core theme of our work. (Totton, 2006, p. 91)

These power issues can be brought into the room in a variety of ways. Differences can be noted and discussed, and, in his writing, Totton has given many examples of this. However, we do not need to make it yet another dogma for therapists. Discussing power difference isn't always helpful if, say, a client does not want to define herself in a particular way. For example, I supervised someone whose black client made a complaint to the service about the therapist's focus on their colour difference. Some clients do not feel that the difference is relevant to the particular therapy work they want to do. Even putting energy into exploring power struggles in the room may or may not be what a client wants to be doing.

In this context the words "power" and "politics" need to be defined. In his book *The Political Psyche* Andrew Samuels defined the two concepts and proceeded to look at them from a depth-psychological perspective. He is well known for analysing macro politics from a psychological perspective, providing many insights around unconscious processes:

By politics I mean the concerted arrangements and struggles within an institution, or in a single society, or between the countries of the world for the organisation and distribution of resources and power, especially economic power ... On a more personal level, there is a second kind of politics. Here political power reflects struggles over agency, meaning the ability to choose freely whether to act and what action to take in a given situation. (Samuels, 1993, p. 3)

Samuels also differentiates between political energy and political power. When people have a vision and are idealistic they generate a lot of energy. Many of us have worked with clients who are passionate about their political causes. However, these could include conservative or even Right-wing causes such as keeping immigrants out of a country or reducing gun control. This would not fit into my focus on equalising, though as a therapist I would be expected to be open to their interests. It is not any kind of politics I want to encourage in my clients. It is an equalising politics that in my subjective arrogance I think would be better for them and for the world, although of course I would never preach to them about this. I feel positive about my personal stance. In the examples above I would hope that the client can see an immigrant

person as equal to themselves, and, to this end, I may gently question the client's assertions and, hopefully, mirror a respectful attitude towards them as a person. I may hope that therapy would change them in an equalising direction, but it may not – and probably won't.

Even the important concept of empowering the client can be problematic as it's based on an assumption that I have the power in the first place to give it to you. In much person-centred work there is trust in the client to empower themselves and the therapist simply creates the best conditions in which that can happen. Some other therapies are much more directive and might seem on the surface to create more unequal relationships, at least within the therapy relationship. However, in cognitive behavioural therapy, the client is given tools to empower them in everyday life, the result of which may be much more equalising for the client: they may go out feeling more equal to others and less depressed.

Depression is often a result of some inequality or hierarchy. It may come from being put down in the family or at school or even through the structures of society. As Susie Orbach put it: "there is a need for psychic structural changes at a fundamental and mass level" (Orbach, 1982, p. 191). I believe that here she is referring to hierarchical structures. These inner and outer structures can subtly, or not so subtly, create feelings of inferiority that can lead to depression and many other psychological problems as well. John Rowan (1976) has even written explicitly that: "more and more research findings have piled up to show that hierarchy does harm to people" (p. 125). A structure can sometimes somehow be more precise than the very slippery concept of power. This may be why the Occupy movement and others refer so often to hierarchy versus horizontalism. In a sense its values and practice focus more on this structural difference than any other ideology; in fact, this movement almost replaces ideology, which is often seen as too problematic.

Schmid does question the fashionable use of the concept of empowerment (p. 8), but he relates it to personal development, spontaneity and creativity which, while important, is limited. I find that having a value of empowering people without including a concept of equality is problematic. In the 1970s and 1980s feminist psychotherapists from all approaches talked a lot about empowering women. A tiny elite of women had – and has – been "empowered" to climb the corporate ladder and hold powerful positions in society – an outcome which can appear as though we fought for only one kind of equality: that is, to be like men in a patriarchal society. Most feminists then didn't struggle to leave housework-bound lives behind only in order to be on the soap-producing firm's board of directors. Most of us wanted more equality throughout society in terms of class and income as well as in our personal lives. Greater self-esteem is vital and empowering but even that idea has been taken over by capitalist companies, as in the L'Oreal advert for shampoo: "Because I'm worth it." Advertising paid for by corporations has infiltrated every aspect of life and turned the hoped for sisterhood of 1970s feminism into an even more competitive world of woman against woman. One kind of aspirational equalising of gender has been used by the market system to help create more inequality in the wider society. Ironically, the vast majority of women are now suffering disproportionately from the recession in terms of both government cuts and job losses.

Like everyone else, therapists are living in a world driven insane by the imbalances of late capitalism. We are ruled by the prevailing paradigm of ruthless competition in which one person or group must win while another loses. People are primarily valued as consumers rather than as human beings. Economic and social failure is seen as the individual's own fault. Depression is on the increase. In our professional lives we are daily faced with the disastrous results. All too often we are simply holding people in desperate situations largely created by the structures of society,

or we are giving quick fixes to return clients to “normal” lives to be good consumers and workers. The hierarchies and inequalities of economics and status get bigger and bigger.

## HIERARCHIES IN THE THERAPY FIELD

Schmid suggests that person-centred therapists need to speak out for their values loudly and clearly in all kinds of settings. They are indeed a necessary threat to the hierarchical status quo in all areas of society. There are, however, also economic issues. In the therapy world there seems to be growing inequality between those who can afford private therapy and those who cannot. So many places that offered free consultations are being closed or restricted. For many therapists concerned about equality, providing cheap or free services has been a vital part of their politics, and this concern and practice goes across the different schools and approaches, from psychodynamic to person-centred. This desire to redress the massive economic inequalities is a value that most progressive therapists share. This involves both a belief in the need to change structures and to empower individuals who have been disempowered by those wider social and economic inequalities.

However, the way we actually work within this equalising context may vary enormously. There can be assumptions about some ways of working being less political from an equalising point of view. The therapist who uses the word “patient” may be seen as less respectful of the person with whom they are working. The word “client” can be problematic too, with its implications that the person is a consumer. Years ago the word “client” was thought to be more empowering for the person, but the market has turned us all into consumers whose only power is to shop. It isn’t really empowering to see all of life as an exchange mechanism. Erich Fromm wrote widely on this topic, commenting that: “The character traits engendered by our socio-economic system, by our way of living, are pathogenic and eventually produce a sick person and thus a sick society” (Fromm, 1976, p. 17).

Much research has shown that the personal relationship between therapist and person is more important than the type of therapy or theoretical orientation. I would guess that this is not unrelated to the sense of equality and respect present in the room. So a psychodynamic therapist can be just as equalising as a person-centred one. The competition between orientations seems to come up more in supervision groups or in other meetings where therapists get together. Often one group is looking down on one approach or another. We can have a vertical mind-set involving “them and us” – superior and inferior. This happens even amongst those of us who believe in equality in other areas of life. We can be too busy fighting for our corner to notice. Also it is always vital to remember that “equal” doesn’t mean the same. It may be that person-centred therapists look down on psychodynamic colleagues for being “less political” and not treating their clients with respect. Psychoanalysts may look down on other therapists for not being “deep” enough. Then there is the issue of status in the profession. This can be viewed and experienced as psychoanalysis at the top and person-centred counselling at the bottom. Even the word “counselling” implies a lesser form of the work. It is seen as more superficial and, therefore, less deep – and “deep” is viewed as superior to “surface”. An equalising model would have all the approaches on a horizontal field, each with their strengths and weaknesses, each with their appropriate applications for particular people at particular times. No one model is ultimately or absolutely above another.

There have been many ways of dealing with these inequalities. One way is to struggle through action from below. Person-centred training courses, centres and institutes have been doing this very effectively, especially over the past 10 years, developing academically and professionally to match the others. Another way is raising awareness of the unhelpfulness of these hierarchies and thinking differently. Yet another way is to bring the different approaches together in a variety of practical ways with joint projects, conferences and journals such as this one. Dialogue is a vital start, but it still isn't happening on a level playing field, and some psychotherapy organisations still don't engage with others.

If we can explore more what we have in common instead of focusing on our differences there may be more chance of having respectful, equalising conversations.

### **THE AUTHENTIC SELF AS NATURALLY POLITICAL**

As Schmid writes: “unconditional positive regard ... this kind of love is political force ... It challenges structures and hierarchies ... opens up authenticity” (Schmid, 2012/2014, p. 14) This was the great hope of the 1960s and 1970s humanistic psychology movement. Through personal transformation we would be more loving, more authentic, and better able to dissolve power hierarchies on small and large scales. Transformed people would not want to consume so much, would become politically active against injustice, would set up more equal communities, and so on. Instead, many have been transformed into being more successful consumers. They are political in the sense of self-empowerment but not in the sense of equalising the society or even their relationships. Nevertheless, no one can deny that there have been political changes in some personal areas. Today many couples and friends of any gender or sexual orientation are more equal, as reflected in equalising legislation. Equality has become a value shared even in mainstream Western society. When two or more people are communicating in a space of love (in the unconditional sense) and authenticity, there is often no sense of a power struggle or of superiority and inferiority. Others might say that needing power over another – or expressing this – is being authentic. The language of authenticity can be used abusively. The need for “power over” can be seen as a compensatory desire when we are not fulfilled and not living from our core self or selves.

“I am just being myself” is a cry so often heard today in many kinds of situations, from the bedroom to the office. I'm not sure that being authentic is in itself political, at least in my sense of equalising. Being an authentic self implies having a consistent sense of a permanent identity. Postmodernists have questioned this idea of the “real” self and out there in the streets more and more people are refusing rigid identities, even of gender. However, the organismic core is different and more grounded in the body. As Wilhelm Reich (1970) argued, it is from this biological core that our equalising political responses come; it is almost instinctual. In fact, I have argued elsewhere that we may have an equalising instinct/tendency as well as an actualising one that develops our personal potential (Chaplin, 2008b).

Yet, in order to feel and act from that core, we need to dissolve layer after layer of defences, cultural conditioning, deeply buried patterns of feeling and thinking, and so on. There are many ways to do this work and all the therapies, including psychoanalysis, can help. Being fully in touch with this core, even fleetingly, is rare, and we may need the value of equalising to inform our lives for those times when we aren't quite there. This equalising is a particular political value beyond generalised concepts of politics defined as anything to do with power or as simply being



human. This may sound too simple and even obvious, but without it many good intentions in human development and actualising can, and have, fallen prey to a narrow, market-driven individualism. The value of equalising already underlies much of the work done in the whole range of psychotherapies. It just needs to be made more explicit and positive.

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