

Psychotherapy and Politics – “Either ... or?” or “Both ... and”? A Brief Response to the Discussant Papers

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ABSTRACT *This article offers a brief response to the discussant papers in this issue in which the author clarifies some misunderstandings and some key themes. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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I appreciate the responses to my original paper (reprinted in this issue) and to my “notification of dispute” here in this special issue of *Psychotherapy and Politics International* as well as the many responses I got in the meantime. This is what I had hoped and envisioned when working on the original article presentations, and I feel well supported in continuing to work on the subject (Schmid, in preparation). I feel honoured having a special issue of the journal devoted to my article and also appreciate being given the right of reply. I want to thank Keith Tudor for his work on this Special Issue and for brushing up my English in this reply.

In most of the five responsive discussant papers, I feel well understood. I regard the vast majority of arguments in the articles as a deepening continuation of dealing with a very important issue at the present stage of the development of psychotherapy. I welcome the fact that many commonalities between different philosophical and societal stances and psychotherapy schools are pointed out, for example between some strands of psychoanalysis and the person-centred approach (PCA); between social ideas influenced by Marx and Lacan and humanistic ideas; and between the Reichian image of the human being). I also welcome that important differences have come to the fore.

In this short rejoinder, I try to clarify a few misunderstandings, and to concentrate on some of the aspects of the discussion that seem important to me.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO BE APOLITICAL

The focus of my paper was to show that psychotherapeutic work itself cannot be separated from politics. In such a short paper, it is not possible to go into details of *how* this can be done. It is feasible in various ways depending on the theoretical orientation of the therapist, the therapeutic relationship, the subject, the resources, and many other factors. One major aim of my article was

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generally to critique the idea that psychotherapeutic work and political engagement can be separated, as it seems to be the stance of many colleagues in practice, although this is not often acknowledged in print. Their concern is that a political stance, overt or hidden, and/or its communication might contradict a necessary neutrality and, thus, disrespect their clients' autonomy by influencing or even manipulating them. If this were true, the therapist would have to abstain from any stance, be it political, moral, religious, spiritual; or be it concerning gender issues, education, personality development, personal goals, therapeutic possibilities, or whatever. However, even if you think – and practise – to this to rigorously, it would, however, not be enough to leave one's posture out of the therapeutic discourse, because whatever you do conveys your convictions. Moreover, since it is simply impossible not to have a world view and a stance towards society, one can only try to hide one's convictions, even from oneself by, for instance not reflecting them – and, perhaps not reflecting upon them. Thus I see openness about one's convictions as the only responsible possibility to deal with the issue at stake – only, of course, in cases where it seems appropriate in the dialogue and the relationship, that is, where it stems from empathy and unconditional positive regard. I regard this as the only way to open up a space for the client to reflect his or her own standpoints and not to be unwantedly manipulated by the therapist's views.

Therefore, I fully agree with Hayes (2014) and Muramoto (2014) that the question is whether a psychotherapist is conscious of being a political being or not (see also Kearny, 2011). I also agree with Muramoto when she stresses the political fields of helping and related professions outside psychotherapy – and, yes, psychotherapy as such does need to go beyond its traditional framework. The life work of Carl Rogers and the historical development of the PCA clearly show that this understanding and practice are intrinsic to person-centeredness. Political work beyond psychotherapy is a consequence of the humanity of the counsellor (Mearns, 2006), and it seems to be clear that this is particularly true for humanistic therapists. The same goes for institutions, including those explicitly dedicated to psychotherapy and counselling and their education and training. I do not think that “the person-centred approach is the most promising field for raised voices, challenge and dispute” (Muramoto, 2014, p. 60), but, together with other emancipatory orientations, like many psychodynamic, experiential and existential and also some systemic ones, I think there is more to be done than what has already been achieved.

THERE ARE MULTIPLE WAYS TO BE POLITICAL AS A THERAPIST AND TO IMPLEMENT ONE'S VALUES

Hayes (2014) (see also Chaplin, 2014) asks what I mean by “everyone is a politician”. If so, he argues, then “everything ends up being political”. I agree: in my view of politics all acts and activity have political implications, and the acts and activities of therapists have greater implications – and, yes, there is a politics in and to my argument. Hayes notes that “surprisingly, the seven points for a ‘political way of being’ are devoid of any specific political content” and asks of what kind this way of being is: conservative, liberal, socialist? He assumes that I do not want to specify or determine the content or kind of politics in which the PCA should engage. For me it is clear that the PCA – an *approach*, not at all a “solution” as Chaplin suggests – with its humanistic foundations and traditions is not at all neutral to this question. It is connected with and bound to values of being a *person*, that is, respect and compassion, emancipation, self-determination and responsibility, autonomy and solidarity,

sovereignty and commitment, etc. (see below): a clearly “progressive” position (Hayes), if you want to use the term. It is progressive in the usual contemporary meaning as well as in the etymological one: it includes the words *pro*, i.e. for, forward, instead of, and *gradus*, i.e., step, thus meaning “forward step by step”. Such a view definitely includes the belief in the personal and societal changeability.

I agree with Hayes that the next crucial question is how to implement these values in concrete political action. This, however, might well be seen differently by different people and needs further reflection on and through experience, discourse and research. From the image of the human being as a person that is inherent in the PCA (Schmid, 1991/2009, 1994, 1998a), it follows – as Hayes points out – that it is important “to see and experience symptoms” not only personal and interpersonal, but as well “as socially and politically formed”. Therefore it is indeed necessary to understand also their social constitution and the fact that we are not only in relationship, but *are* relationship as pointed out in my description of the understanding of “person” as response (ibid.) and the importance of the Other (Schmid, 1994, 1998b, 2006, 2013a) for epistemology and anthropology. The social constitution of the human being as person is an essential and thus indispensable part of the image of the human being in the PCA and can clearly be found in Carl Rogers’ writings. One might come to this view from different starting points, not only from a Marxian or Lacanian perspective, but also, for instance, from dialogic philosophy and existential positions, all of which imply the consequence that psychotherapy has to be about how clients can “become political agents of their lives and their futures” (Hayes, 2014, p. 37), and as Pavon-Cuéllar (2014) stresses in his paper. According to Carl Rogers, this is not to be achieved by a concept “based on an assumption that I have the power in the first place to give it to you” (Chaplin, 2014, p. 54) or that this approach gives power to the person; on the contrary, according to Rogers (1977) “it never takes it away” (p. xii).

THERAPY FOR THE PERSON OR CHANGE OF SOCIETY? “BOTH ... AND”!

Regarding the disagreements Pavon-Cuéllar has with my article, I see the question whether an image of human nature is the consequence of politics or the other way round not as “either ... or” but, rather, as “both ... and”. The images and worldviews we hold are not givens (there is no “natural” human being without any cultural influence) but, rather, developed out of and formed by our experiences and influences of other persons and society which then guide our politics. The same goes for the debate as to whether we need psychotherapy *or* political action. I do not think it’s an “either ... or” choice; we need “both ... and” (Schmid, 2013b). Only to change the world or the circumstances and to reject therapy would be a big mistake and might well leave the person alone in his or her misery in the concrete situation.

The question as to whether we should care more about changing society than about helping persons to develop and maybe even refrain from or reject therapy (as form of repairing) – “care and cure, rehabilitation and relief, instead of radical change, transformation and revolution” (Pavon-Cuéllar, 2014, p. 27) – touches this very point.

In my view, firstly, this is also a matter of what we understand when we talk about changing, transforming, or revolutionising society by means of a more or less soft evolution, or a more or less radical revolution, anarchy, pressure, furthering self-development, equalisation, differentiation, and so on. From a person-centred view this implies that the issue is in what way and to what extent we can think of *facilitating and fostering* society to change according

to person-centred ideas following the same principles as we do in individual or group therapy (Schmid, 2013b, 2015).

Secondly, concerning Pavon-Cuéllar's reproach of selfism, including that of empathism, there seems to be an obvious mixing-up of *individual/self* and *person*. The approach is *person-centred*, not *individuo-centric* or *self-centred*. The person-centred understanding of "person", based on personalistic and dialogical anthropology, views the person as a substantial *and* relational being, autonomous and interdependent. A one-sided individual view is as missing the essence of this understanding as is a one-sided collective view. Development and change come about by one's own resources (substantial) and by our interconnectedness (relational), that is our incurable sociality (Rogers, 1965) – and both are dialectally connected. Accordingly, development and change comes about by personal and social development out of own resources *and* "interfering" by others, that is, for instance, psychotherapy and sociotherapy.

With this image of the human as a person, personal development always encompasses the social dimension of a person's life: the social is not something in addition to the personal (see Hayes), and so the political is not something in addition to the therapeutic.

I think the fine paper by Woodard (2014) is a good example for this. I felt touched by his article with its clear voice of how psychotherapy might well be used to reach political aims in a suppressing way in order to protect the interests of those in power. It gives another example that a seemingly apolitical therapeutic attitude is highly politically relevant and thwarts the idea of psychotherapy as one way to facilitate people to become the persons they could become.

All this leads to the question how "sociotherapy" must be understood, set up and how it can work (Wilkins, 2012; Schmid, 2013a), a major challenge for all psychotherapies and a key challenge of Carl Rogers who, towards the end of his life, in his Honorary Lecture to the American Psychological Association, urged us not to content ourselves merely with treating people "but to change the system" (Rogers, as quoted by Yalom, 1995, p. viii).

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