

Geiser, Christiane Talking About Differences.

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Abstract:

As a client-centred and experiential therapist and teacher I am passionately interested in questions of growth and change. I am particularly fascinated by the differences between people and how we could describe them in order to learn more about the different worlds people live in. "There are as many "real worlds" as there are people", Rogers said, and people's basic assumptions, preferences, and habits in thinking, feeling and behaviour colour even the way they do focusing! In order to understand more about the precise way meaning may go from the implicit unknown to symbolization even in "difficult" focusing processes, I will give you some ideas about focusing modalities, character-structures and bonding-styles as we conceptualise them.

1 About the Use of Typologies

Today I want to talk to you out of my experiences as a therapist (mostly long-term-therapies) and as a teacher of future therapists and focusing trainers. I will present examples for beginners and for experienced therapists.

When I look back at all the approaches I have been socialized in during my trainings (client-centred therapy, body therapy, family therapy – systemic approach- and focusing), I learnt a lot of **general assumptions** about helpful skills and attitudes to support the growth of clients. They seemed to be valid and effective for **all** people, regardless whether they are women or men, children or grown-ups, highly-educated or not, whatever their religious or cultural backgrounds are or whether they are showing individual habits, patterns, and preferences.

And indeed: this saying of Roger's to always – and he says "always"!!!- start with exploring and accepting the client's world, facing and entering his or her way of living, thinking

and behaving is an absolute challenge and radical discipline in the PCA, which I deeply appreciate.

And in Focusing too -as a philosophical discipline and as a method for inner growth and change - this opening-up to life-changing movements, to new, flowing processes is one of the greatest assets of this approach for me.

So there seem to be helpful conditions, which enable people to go on with their lives. But the interesting question for me is: **all people? And all people in the same way?**

In my private and my professional life I have always been fascinated by the **differences** between people and how we could describe them in order to learn more about the different worlds people live in. Our basic assumptions, preferences, and habits in thinking, feeling and behaviour colour our relationships, our professional life, even science, politics, and religious and cultural issues – and the other way round: we as individuals are influenced by collective patterns. Knowing more about these underlying individual and collective structures, a lot of misunderstanding could be avoided. Empathy, respect, and tolerance can grow, and ultimately this attitude could help keep peace.

“There are as many “real worlds” as there are people”, Rogers said, and out of our constructivist background we have learnt a lot about different realities. In my private language I call this phenomenon: we live on different “planets”. To learn about these differences, as we are doing it in all our training-groups, to accept them, to sort them out and name and even “classify” them in a sort of **typology** has become an important part of my research in the last 25 years.

Mary wrote in one of her last emails to the Coordinators list about main principles and core concepts of Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy. She says *“We use theory only experientially, never to categorize people”*. I am not so sure. To build a theory experientially and to find out categories must not exclude each other. Our categories or typologies of „focusing modalities“ or of „character styles“ for example are **concepts** in the way Gene Gendlin described it, dealing with the complexity of our being in the world. I do not speak of disorders or derangements or pathology. These categories do not serve as a psychiatric diagnosis nor should they point out the correct treatment. Yet, they can be tremendously helpful in the therapeutic and also private exchanges with people who live on a completely different planet than mine -especially if you believe that yours is the only one which exists

I would like to infect and inspire you with my curiosity and interest in the explicit and the subtle differences, in the wealth of how human beings create their inner worlds and how they influence the outside world. I would also like to arouse acceptance and compassion for how we function ourselves, for our strengths and weaknesses, our talents and limitations.

And I will try to answer questions like the ones that have recently been asked on the focusing-list: *“Has anyone found that Focusing is not a good approach for certain patients? How do you decide if it is appropriate for a given person or not? Are there some clients who find it impossible to focus: what characterizes them? What are the practical and theoretical limitations of Focusing-Oriented Therapy?”* or answer to Ellen Kirschner’s astonished question while interviewing me for “Staying in Focus”, whether I really think that focusing is not good for all people. Yes, indeed, I think that even focusing is not the master key to all people and to all processes of growth. In my training groups I teach carefully, when and why focusing is a good tool during the therapy process and when and why not, and how we can change between focusing sequences (micro-processes for example, as Mia Leijssen calls them) and other client-centred forms of therapy. And how the way we are colours the way we do focusing – and the way we teach focusing!

2 About Modalities

This chapter may be above all useful for focusing beginners when they learn about the different processes of symbolization.

“Words, actions, images which come from the felt sense carry forward the client’s experience into little steps”, Mary writes.

Have you ever thought about the precise way we perceive and construct our outer and inner world differently? And perhaps carry forward our experiencing differently?

So let us start to have a look at the different worlds we live in!

First I will give you two simple everyday **examples**.

What comes first, when I say the word **“rose”**? Take a minute and try to collect all your ideas.

And now I will tell you what comes to my mind first, and in order to enter my world please listen to me and look at me.

When I hear the word rose, I immediately smell the flower. I sense the sides of my nose while breathing in and there comes this little satisfied sigh when it smells like the ones in the garden of my grandparents. I remember myself standing there, between the apple tree and the place where different sorts of roses are in bloom. It is summer, bees are humming, and the roses are as tall as I am. Then I remember these tender blossoms and petals, which are like velvet when I touch them with my fingers, and the remarkably strong stalk with thorns when I follow the flower down with my hands. And with this all, at last the picture comes and I **see** the flower: yes, that is what a rose looks like.

Did you notice some resemblance or difference to the world you live in?

Another example: **blackbird**.

Some of you smile. Some of you frown. How do we - in our different worlds - “store” a blackbird? It makes a difference whether we once killed one on the street with a car or whether our teacher was mean to us because we always forgot the name of this bird. Or we have sweet gentle memories, like I have: I hear them immediately, and with the melody emerges this special feeling of twilight. I stand in my kitchen after a long winter, the sun is setting slowly, these remarkable long days again, I am preparing dinner with fresh green salad and new potatoes and the blackbird is singing at the top of the roof - springtime. Or another memory: I wake up in the morning, I don’t know where I am, oh yes, it’s the room of my lover, for the first time we meet at his house, I feel a little bit like a stranger, the future is open, it is not yet clear where our relationship is going –but then suddenly the blackbird sings from the roof outside, and I feel comforted and peaceful.

And remembering this the song of the Beatles comes to my mind

Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these broken wings and learn to fly
All your life
You were only waiting for this moment to arise.

Could you hear the melody with your inner ears? I think of a friend of mine singing this song with his guitar at the end of the day outside on the terrace of the house in which we train our focusing people, and we all were singing with him.

And after all this, there is of course the picture of the bird with black feathers and a yellow bill, sitting on the grass on a rainy day and pulling an earth-worm out of the ground.

So, these examples are about “**modalities**”, as NLP-people call it. We borrowed the name and broadened the concept. We developed some theory about “focusing modalities”, **precisely describing the way meaning may go from the implicit unknown to symbolization.**

I think it is very fruitful to realize which modalities are our favourite ones and the favourite ones of our clients. Nobody uses all entries in the same way, we generally have one or two in which we are creative and trained and others we neglect.

For example:

A preference could be in the field of the ears, the **auditory** channel: out of the inner experience there emerge words, sentences, melodies, sounds, noises... and the symbolization can be written down or spoken out loud to someone who listens. But this is only one way to symbolize. Others are specialized in the **visual** modality: they have images or colours inside and can describe them or paint them. Others have **bodily felt** sensations and can move or show us the way their bodies express the symbolization. And there are some people who feel **emotions** and express them. And so on...

Of course: all these parts belong together, but we have found out that people have their specific "entry", and as a client-centred accompanier I have to meet them where they are, and then follow their track, when they begin to unfold their symbols, following these little steps Mary spoke about.

Now, If I were your client, what would you learn about my inner world? What have you heard and seen?

Yes, I am a person with a rich inner world of sounds, melodies, words, and sentences. Not without a good reason did I study language and literature and linguistics when I was young. Next, I remember atmospheres and moods very intensely. And third, in my world there are a lot of body sensations like smelling, touching, movements. But: Pictures, images, and visual memories don't emerge quickly in my inner world! So, if someone asks me: what do you see? What does it look like? Can you imagine? and so on – I get lost immediately.

A little exercise:

You can try it for yourself and find out what your preferences are: please close your eyes, and think back: think of the situation in which you last led a person through a focusing process. What do you remember? The atmosphere in the room? The noise in your office? Your own emotional state during this day? Her look - her clothes, her hair, her jewels, her perfume? Her voice? The content, the words and phrases she uses? The way she laughs? How she looks when she is touched or angry, the colour of her eyes? Do you remember how she breathes? How she sits, upright or sunken down? What sort of handshake, when you saw her? Or if you hugged her: how did her body feel against your chest, your belly?

Take some minutes time to talk to your neighbour about your experience.

Perhaps you know by now some of the peculiarities of your own perceptive world? And of the person whom you listened to?

But what has all this got to do with focusing?

I think that it is very important to learn about these differences in order to better understand and not mix up ones own preferences and the world of other people.. For if we do not take care, we speak and ask out of our own world to our clients or focusing partners – and miss the world they really live in, and so they have always to translate it into their own world like this:

Client: Gesticulates and says: it's something like a bowl (makes round soft movements with his hands)
Therapist: What does it look like?
Client: I am just forming it with my hands.
Therapist: Can you describe it to me?
Client: It is soft and cool and smooth under my fingers
Therapist: Can you just stay with this picture
Client: It isn't a picture, it's just a feeling in my hand and my arms of forming this vessel, it isn't finished yet, but it will be, and yes, there comes a word: to create something. That is important!.

You see what I mean? When the movement starts from the implicit to the explicit, from the felt sense to any kind of symbolization, we want to stay near the client's world during this process of unfolding. So we have to meet them in their way they perceive and construct their inner life.

When I started with focusing more than 20 years ago, at first sight I thought I never could learn it. I never had pictures and the whole group and the trainer symbolized in a visual way and asked for it, and so I had a hard time. On the other hand I had to learn that there really exist people who speak to me and forget the content afterwards or don't remember the sentences I have said... a difficult lesson in partnerships for example ...And because sometimes a modality in which I live apparently easily is at the same time a stuck place (in my case I use to repeat sentences over and over in my head...), and I had to learn to integrate pictures, images and visual conceptions into my repertoire to enlarge my inner world (like: " if you hear these words - is there a picture which fits?").

A client of mine had to do it the other way round: she suffers from severe attacks of obsessive thinking and feeling caused by photos or pictures she sees in newspapers or on posters—she had to learn to stop this visual channel and go to less frightening modalities like movements and sounds—thus having a choice, which helped her to leave these stuck states earlier.

And if you think at all the clients with severe chronic pain syndromes, they always feel drawn into their physical body and urgently have to learn something about the other modalities to find some rest and peace. And perhaps after some time they can come back to body sensations which are not only painful – and perhaps one day they even can allow a felt sense to come...

3 About structure bound patterns

The next chapter will be about **long-term therapies** where we have to handle complex life-themes, and some knowledge about deep-rooted personality patterns and relationship habits is necessary. They reach from the slight colours of personal preferences (like I referred to in the last chapter about modalities) to the “wall paper feeling”, as Gene calls it) to hidden assumptions to massive blocks. Remember: I talk about “normality”, not about pathology. But sometimes, you know, my client and I as a therapist have a hard time, because there are process-blocking patterns which are so strong that they can drive you to despair.

If I understand the concept in the right way, Gene was always interested in this forward-movement, these important steps toward building new meaning, letting fresh air in. He obviously was not so fascinated by exploring at length all the things that block the movement, i.e. the boundaries, the dead ends, the way different people lose their free space, cope with their critics, have a preference to some ways of being in the world, think, feel, behave and so on. Some of his colleagues (Ann Weiser Cornell and Barbara Gavin, Rene Maas) did some research on these issues, as you know. And my own interest always has been not only to focus on people’s resources and talents, but also on their limitations, on the situations where something does not work, where there is no flow or where people fail.

In his early writings Gene uses the term “**structure bound**”, and we found this concept very helpful to build some theory about structure bound patterns in thinking, feeling and behaviour.

Gene writes:

“My experience is structure-bound in manner, when I experience only this bare outline and feel only this bare set of emotions, lacking the myriad of fresh detail of the present... We often speak of contents or „experiences“ as if they were set, shaped units with their own set structure. But this is the case only to the extent that my experience is structure bound in its manner.... Insofar as my experiencing is structure bound, it does not implicitly function. It is not „seamlessly“ felt by me with its thousands of implicit aspects functioning. ... Rather, in this regard, my experience is a „frozen whole“ and will not give up its structure. ... Since within the bare structured frozen whole experiencing does not function in interaction with present detail, the structure is not modified by the present. Hence, it remains the same, it repeats itself in many situations without ever changing. So long as the manner of experience remains structure bound, the structures themselves are not modifiable by present occurrences... structure-bound aspects are not in process.” (1964)

We conceptualized three layers of structure-bound patterns and did research with hundreds of people, asking them thoroughly to explain their world to us in depth.

First layer: basically being in the world, 3 planets, very early in life, mostly pre-verbal

Second layer: narrow places in thinking, self-reflection and feeling, 8 planets

Third layer: acting and behaving, 3 planets

I will give you some very brief overview.

3.1 Layer One

With regard to basic themes all people have to face, there are three important issues: Do I feel a right to exist? Do I experience myself as having an own particular form? Do I live in intercommunication with others? So we can conceptualize three different “planets”, and usually we feel at home on one of them. There are safe, rich places on it, many talents in it, but also questions, needs and trouble.

I'll give you a short survey with special weight on focusing processes.

- On the **first** planet (existence) people are very autonomous persons. Often they are gifted artists and thinkers with a strong and rich inner life. They feel first of all good with themselves, do not expect that it is easy to cope with others or that there is something coming from other persons. When they for instance enter a new group, they look around, often feel like a stranger, not belonging to this group. They tend to stay at the side of the room, to be alone during the breaks, it is not easy for them to do social talk with others. These often are clients who can easily slip into their own world of experiencing. They have a creative space inside, but it's hard to communicate it to others because they do not feel welcome. Only if we are interested and express this interest in a right way, they will tell us about it. As a therapist I first have to put my emphasis on just being there, facilitating the inner relationship the client has with himself. But later on in a therapeutic process it will be a challenge to deepen topics of relationship, communicating, and being connected. They have to learn that we need something from them, that we cannot read their thoughts, that they have to show us their inner world in order to belong.
- The **second** planet (form) is the one where people are seeking their own form and shape, their special kind of being. They are always looking outwards at other people to check who they are themselves. They are intuitive people with a strong feeling for atmospheres, talented in all fields of togetherness. But whenever they are in contact with other people, they immediately lose themselves and their feeling of their own being, look around and realize everything, how other people might feel, the atmosphere in the room, what is going on. But as to themselves, they are extremely weak in staying with their own feeling and thoughts and not losing them in the presence of others. When they do focusing, they try to do it as it is written in the books, and when I ask them what there emerges inside, they often say "nothing" or "I don't know". As a guide I always have to bring the emphasis back from relationship-matters to themselves, help them to close their eyes, to stay close to their fleeting inner world, to begin just with this "nothing" letting it softly unfold..
- The **third** planet (communication) is the one where people know who they are and that they are welcome to exist, but they always have questions around the topics of giving and taking, nurturing and being held, togetherness and loneliness, or of being truly connected. They feel their needs and want to belong and feel the needs of other people too. Their questions often touch issues like: is there enough time for us all? Enough space for me and the other person? A containment safe enough so that nothing gets lost? How can we come together? As guides we have to show them that it is o.k. to need something and to free them from the load that they have to feel obliged to take care of us and our well-being.

These are examples of our basic home-planets. It would need much more time to explore them further, but perhaps you got just a glimpse at the different planets and to which you belong?

It is very interesting to find out how our home planet is coloured and how very much it is different from the worlds my partners, my colleagues, and my clients live in – sometimes it needs a big amount of translation between our different worlds to understand each other! And in groups and teams and networks it needs them all, the talents and qualities of each planet can come together to avoid one-sidedness.

3.2 Layer Two

Coming to the next layer there is another set of structure bound patterns, which are very meaningful in therapy-processes and in our daily life: we call them “**narrow places**”. They resemble best the “frozen wholes” Gene talked about or “stuck states” other orientations call them. They are characterized through strong opposite poles: yes/no, good/bad, always/never. When you start to think and feel in such narrow lines, there is nothing more in between.

I'll give you some examples:

My client Lina always feels worthless, bad, ill, disturbed. She interprets a look on my face in a way that I don't see her, don't like her. She cannot imagine that I appreciate her as a person. When there is a detail she does not succeed in, it is a catastrophe: she feels as if her whole person failed. Other people are always better, prettier, and richer than she is. She looks at me, but she is not in contact with me and my words. And, even worse, she is not in contact with her own experiencing process, she is stuck in the very same pattern of feeling worthless. Could she ever believe that there might be a world without judging and comparing and issues of worth?

Another client, Roberto. Whenever a problem arises, he has an idea how to handle it. Mostly these are brilliant ideas, and he looks as if he'd rather jump up and start to do something immediately. He hates it when others do something and he feels helpless. But: his problems all arise in relationships where to do something or to cause others to do something is often the wrong idea. So what could life be like without doing, without being active?

And the third example, Muriel. She often is in a so called depressed mood, i.e., all things in her life seem to be insoluble, she always sees difficulties first and asks herself, how she could handle her life. She looks numb and paralysed, grey, without any vitality. How could she find the way back to rhythms and pulsations and to this back and forth process we need to connect with our felt sense?

In our training program, we describe more of these narrow places (concerning issues of fear, addiction, trust, body-symptoms, social rules), but these examples will do for the moment.

All these people are not “ill” or “disturbed”. But parts of them do not answer to fresh and new inputs, they meet life with stereotype reactions, there is no ability or willingness to respond otherwise, they cannot get to that inner experiencing place from which new meaning could arise.

If these patterns are strong and the narrowing almost complete, it is impossible to do focusing. It's like marking time, and the first step to start a focusing process (like being at a right distance, building a free space, creating a friendly inner relationship to this part of yourself) is almost impossible. And this narrow place sometimes is more than a “part”, it has become a lifestyle, a habit, a way of being, with sometimes severe breakdowns and much despair.

Mostly these narrow places are unknown to our clients. This is above all because in this stuck state they are convinced that the world **IS** like this at the moment: that the therapist **DOES** criticize and value, that there **IS** something to do to go on, that life **IS** too complicated and too difficult to bear. It is something like a detective's work to discover that this is not true, that their narrow sight colours their view, that not all people look at the world through their glasses, and important!: that there is **an active part** in themselves that stabilizes this structure bound feelings and thinking every day anew. It does not feel like this, but try:

*If you would like a little **exercise** tomorrow morning you can look how you usually start the day: What precisely do you do first in the morning after waking up? What do you think? What do you feel? Listen to your inner sentences; look at your inner pictures. What comes up? Do you recognize a pattern? Something that you always do or think or feel? It is like tuning your instrument for the day – it is very interesting to find out how you do it. Do you create a narrow world with one or two themes that are your well-known music for the day? Or do you open up to the richness of life?*

You may understand that from this point of view I don't like the idea that these frozen places are to be equated with "critics" or "bad parents" or the "super-ego". This stems from the old idea that it is the environment which causes pain and limitations and deformation and that I only have to free myself from these biographical or cultural restrictions and do my own thing out of my own truth.

We always affect each other. And it is an important part of a therapy to learn to step back and recognize one's own activity which sustains a habit and to be aware how my own being influences the world around me.

As to these narrow places, the big question in long-term therapies is: could people learn to think and feel and behave differently??

It takes time and trust and different approaches to by and by get to know the structure-bound pattern and its role in one's life. It sometimes is a long process to find alternatives, because there has been much identity building around those character patterns, and it is not so easy to let go. It absolutely needs us as companions in the search, and I am convinced that it needs very different sorts of experiential responses from us as therapists to meet these different life patterns.

Then after some time – sometimes a long one – there will be some moving and breathing again, choices will be available, and perhaps our clients can feel what "all this" is about – and we are back to the "not yet", the "more than"! So it is absolutely important to distinguish between two movements in therapy: the cyclic movement which brings our experiencing further – and the turning around in never-ending circles while we remain in a structure bound pattern.

3.3 Layer three

Let me say just a few words about the remaining three planets in the third layer. They have to do with the way we move our bodies and meet the challenges of life. Are we used to do our work bit by bit, one thing after another, segment after segment? Or do we rush through life, starting ten things, trying to do them all at once? Or are we waiting until enough pressure forces us to explode and work until all is finished? If we had time enough, I could tell you some funny episodes people can tell you about living together in one house or trying to work together with these different character structures with all their talents and weaknesses...

4 Bonding Styles

I finish my paper with just a few remarks about what I call different "styles of bonding" or "styles of professional relationship".

If you meet someone to do a focusing session, you enter a specific sort of relationship. If you teach focusing, this relationship will be of another kind. The two of you always form a new "body", being each an environment for the other. Remember: interaction first! You can describe different types of such relational-being-together, e. g. teacher-pupil, mother-child, in which we accord each other a certain status: I am a teacher because I have students; without them I wouldn't have this part. We two are embedded in a school or other surroundings which enable us to have this mutual sort of relationship, this "bonding-style",

we call it. As to the mother-child-“body”: There is no baby alone, or a mother alone – there is always a “mother-baby-relationship”.

It would be very interesting to illustrate this principle in regard to the different styles of focusing activities we have created in our network! What are our preferred bonding-styles? But I have to come to an end, so just some final remarks about:

5 Thinking Beyond the Individual

During the last 15 years we have studied group processes and the role focusing could play in the organizational space. We have learned a lot about something we call “group felt sense”, a sense of clarity of something “we all know”, that sometimes emerges in groups if we are patient enough to accept each other with all our individual assumptions, and the whole complexity of each situation at any given point. This can happen if we carefully listen to all our different meanings and to our own process and the process of the whole group. If we are willing and able to suspend our certainties, to allow that there may be different ways to see reality, then there can emerge something like “group intelligence”.

In the last years I have learned more about David Bohm and his dialogue groups, and we teach these forms of thinking together in our training groups and at the University of Zurich. And if the participants are aware of their structure-bound stuck places and their stereotype reactions and ways of thinking and behaviour, and if they can do some focusing-movements inside from time to time to check what is going at a deeper level, it is so much easier to sit in these groups and to have a feeling of a group-body which is learning together!

For me, bringing this dialogue thinking into the world is real social commitment, peace work, if you want to call it that, an investigation into how larger groups can perhaps change the world a little bit.

I hope that I have been able to share with you some of my fascination about “differences that make differences”, as Bateson used to say – thank you for listening!

6 Biographical note

Christiane Geiser lives in Switzerland as a therapist in private practice. She is a supervisor and trainer in the post-graduate training institute (“GFK”) she runs together with her husband Ernst Juchli. She trains people to become client-centred and experiential body-psychotherapists in a 5-year-training program. She has been an active member of the focusing network in the German speaking countries for more than 20 years. Besides, she is involved in philosophical research and studies about group processes (dialogue groups according to David Bohm).

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