

Suzanne Keys (ed.). **Idiosyncratic Person-Centred Therapy**. From the personal to the universal. PCCS Books, 2003. Reviewed by Christiane Geiser, in: PCEP Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies, Vol. 4, Number 1, Spring 2005, p. 71-72

This is a courageous book, a necessary book: a book needed more than ever in our approach, which tends to split along divisions such as “genuine” person centered versus “not-genuine”, directive versus nondirective, and – this is the most problematic differentiation - right versus wrong. It is needed badly at a time when our profession is in danger of becoming threatened by various political and economic constraints.

In his foreword, Brian Thorne finds strong words, such as “seditious”; he calls the book, a “passionate counterblast to the prevailing Zeitgeist”, and he is sure that it “will incite controversy and, in some quarters, hostility or even contempt” (p.i).

I can say that reading this book was mostly a light and joyful experience, maybe because I am one of those client-centered therapists and trainers myself who work and teach an idiosyncratic “private mixture”.

Can we work from a coherent theoretical framework and be idiosyncratic? How do we embody person-centered theory, and how does it evolve within us and manifest in our practice? These were the questions given to the contributors, and each of these eleven counselors from England, Scotland and Northern Ireland try to answer them with great honesty. All are engaged, compassionate, warm-hearted, thoughtful persons, each of them personalizing the theory and making it come alive, as Tony Merry writes in his epilogue.

The editor, Suzanne Keys, speaks about reclaiming the concept of idiosyncrasy:

”This book embraces idiosyncrasy as an essential part of a therapists practice and goes so far as to state that person-centred therapists and relationships are by definition idiosyncratic. ... These chapters explore how the “private mixture” of the unique and unpredictable so often produces wonderful and unexpected moments of personal and professional growth” (p. 2)

Issues concerning individuality versus generality are important ones in all therapy theories. In the PCA we have to look at the precise level of abstraction in order to address the question of whether someone or something is person-centered or not. Rogers himself was mostly concerned with the rather abstract level of "conditions" and attitudes in a helping relationship, not with the question of how exactly the individual therapist embodies and conveys these attitudes to his clients –which is highly dependent on individual and contextual aspects. Interestingly enough, we find all the don'ts (i.e. don't introduce skills and strategies from other traditions! Don't use techniques!) on this level of concrete interventions. But person-centered therapy is not a canon, a body of rules. All practitioners have to live with the commitment and the tension between using all they can bring to the therapeutic encounter and strictly keeping to the core conditions.

The idiosyncratic therapists in this book sometimes go beyond the usual settings in order to meet their clients at depth. They start a session with breathing together to explore the intimate connections between feeling, emotion and body. They give their private notes to their clients and discuss them together, thus changing note taking to a mode of relational empathy. They respond freely to their clients needs: to move around the room, to dance or paint, to kick a punch ball. They work a whole day long instead of single sessions. One of them once took a client home to live with her for a while, offering an asylum in the old sense of a place of safety. In one of the most touching scenes of the book a counselor sings together with her severely disturbed client, holding his hands. In another example she feeds a woman suffering from bulimia, who for the first time in her life felt hungry.

In each case, I as a reader had this intuitive inner response of “rightness”, a deep sense of “yes, that was exactly the necessary response”.

But what emerges from such special presence in the relationship can never become a set of rules. It does not mean you always have to feed a bulimic person, or that you have to sing with someone losing his ground or that it is “right” to touch someone, to hold hands, to breathe together. Nor does it mean that you are never allowed to act in these ways. Right or wrong are relational categories; you cannot rely on an externalized locus of evaluation.

After having returned from teaching a group of therapists, Jan Hawkins, one of the authors, writes:

“I recognised throughout that weekend how often I caught myself reminding the group of students that interventions I mentioned should not be taken as prescriptive. Many of the most intense moments of connections I have experienced within sessions are when a different, perhaps rather unusual, mode of relating has evolved and often these have never been repeated. This is because the individuality or uniqueness of the communication, whatever the creative idea or mode of interaction, evolved with that particular individual in that specific situation.” (p.38)

If you look with critical eyes, it is not so easy to justify these unique responses. We are dealing with important questions of professionalism: Is it enough just to be the person you are? How can you rely on that? Is it possible to trust the inner experience? Can we “train” intuition? Where is the fine line between working from authentic presence and acting out unprofessional egoism, structure-bound experience or unquestioned assumptions? As Keys notes:

“To be a person centred therapist and to value idiosyncrasy demand a high degree of integrity, rigorous self-discipline and an ongoing dedication to being as fully human as possible in the service of the client and the relationship.” (p.2)

To write a book like this is a risky endeavor. I hope that readers will be open-hearted even when they feel irritation. Perhaps they will be able to note the automatic inner critic and then compare it to the slow unfolding of a felt sense: what is so irritating for me? Where are my own desires and wishes for an authentic relationship?

As a lifelong task, we have to re-create our tradition over and over. I hope we can stand up for disciplined freedom in our approach, for ethical practice which does not mean conformity or becoming “psychological technicians fearful of stepping out of line” (Thorne, p.i). We need diversity, and we need dialogue. I recommend this book as an excellent opportunity to learn from another without fear, as Rogers (e.g. 1980) always proposed.