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Knowledge and Wisdom in Training: How to embody the client-centred/experiential approach

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Abstract:

What is a “good” training? There are rather few publications on the topic of teaching and training in the PCA. As a passionate teacher I want to stress some aspects, which in my experience have proved to be essential:

- *The body*
- *Learning from each other*
- *Talking about differences*
- *Structure-bound behaviour*
- *Beyond the individual*
- *Being professional colleagues*

Introduction

We have come to this conference to honour Germain Lietaer and his work. For the first time I met him and his team after I had presented a paper at the conference in Gmunden 1995 about interpersonal patterns in PCE, and he was interested how my findings could be tested and discussed in the training of therapist in his university.

Whenever I spoke at conferences in the future and saw him or his colleagues from Leuven University sitting in the audience, there was an atmosphere of curiosity, interest and friendliness around them. And by listening to their lectures and reading their papers I realized an openness and broad-mindedness in their thinking that I deeply appreciated. In her morning-lecture yesterday Mia Leijssen called it “wisdom”.

I will talk about wisdom as well, about knowledge and wisdom in training future therapists.

I am running a training institute in Switzerland together with my husband and a team of colleagues. Choosing one of the training institutes is the usual way people learn psychotherapy after having finished their university studies in psychology or medicine. For 25 years we have been training people from the German speaking countries in a 5-year-long

psychotherapy training in PCE, and we are doing further education for people in medical, social and pedagogical fields of work.

When I try to place our client-centred and experiential institute within the “one nation many tribes”-discussion, we surely belong to those who expand the approach. In this lecture I will point out two ways in which we differ from most of our colleagues at least in the German speaking countries. Afterwards I will say something about settings of learning, which have proved to be helpful, and last but not least make some remarks on trainees becoming colleagues.

The two ways are:

- The conceptualisation of differences between people
- What it means in the training of people not to exclude the body

II. Differences:

When I look back at the approaches I was socialized in during my trainings I realise that 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.

Paul Wilkins (Wilkins, 2003, 19f.) says:

“There is a widespread assumption that the attitudinal conditions are “good enough” in any relationship” and: “it is probably taken as evidence that the person-centred approach is generally applicable without modification, that there are universal human qualities which override differences.”

So there seem to be helpful conditions, which enable people to grow. 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 exactly these differences between people and how we could describe them in order to learn more about the different worlds people live in. And: how to do it in a client-centred way! As our basic assumptions, preferences and habits in thinking, feeling and behaviour obviously colour our relationships, our professional life, and our theoretical thinking.

To learn about these differences, to give order and clarification to these phenomena, to make sense – that is: to create an order that seems reasonable, not to find one, which is already given! -, to name and even “classify” them in a sort of **typology** – all this has become an important part of my research in the last 25 years. We have studied hundreds of people, mainly in our training groups, asking them to thoroughly explain their world to us in depth.

Our categories or typologies, for example, „focusing modalities“ or „character patterns“ or “bonding styles” are **concepts** in the way Gene Gendlin described them, always open to be reformulated if we learn something new.

In his early writings Gendlin (Gendlin 1964) 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.

He 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.”

In our institute we decided early in our history not to use medical language and medical thinking in our understanding of people or during supervision. We like the term “structure bound”. It is a neutral one; it says nothing about illness or disorder. It says something about one-sidedness, about frozenness; about not being in process. Using this term, we talk about “normality”, not about pathology. The categories we developed should not serve as a psychiatric diagnosis nor should they point out the correct “treatment”. They describe a dysfunction in the process of relating, of being with. We do not meet a disturbed person, or “someone with a personality disorder”, but rather someone with problematic manners of experience or problematic ways of being with. It is a process-specificity, which needs differential empathy and various experiential responses from us.

Being present with a client, fresh at any given moment, does not exclude knowledge about these phenomena mentioned above. We do not want to renounce the knowledge we gained in years of experience while reflecting and thinking over hundreds of situations with our clients and together with them. My knowledge and the knowledge of my client are part of our “situational bodies”, as Gendlin would name it, and my professional knowledge about differences in the process of relating is an intrinsic part of my trying to realize the relationship conditions.

So how can we train people in the issue of structure bound feeling, thinking and behaviour?

In a person-centered training, students have to begin this learning-process by experiencing, in various situations, their own ways of being in the world. All of us have special aspects and ways of relating that are one-sided. These aspects are always both: talents and limitations, strengths and weaknesses. And all of us, I think, especially we as professionals, have to be aware of these parts, because they influence how we act in relationships and the way we think and feel and behave in our work.

In the beginning, it is always a big surprise for our trainees how different the worlds are we live in. They are puzzled: Oh really, this is not the way all people think? Or: Oh, there are others who react like I do?

Our trainees are obliged to learn about their one-sidedness and how it may influence the way they are present with a client. So they begin to look closer and find out personal patterns: Are they always the ones who get afraid? Who get angry? Is it typical for them to think of difficulties first? Do they search for intensity in their lives – and in their work? Is their first thought, whenever being confronted with an uncertainty, to immediately have a plan, a strategy? Do they struggle with questions of worth (remember that not all people do this!!)?

It is an interesting journey, and our trainees start searching in their contexts too to find more of these patterns: in literature, art, political discussion on the TV and so on – mostly an amusing experience.

Often these structure-bound patterns are unknown to us. Sometimes people around us know more about them than we do. This is above all because in this state we are convinced that the world **IS** like this at the moment: that the boss **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 a detective's work to discover that this is not the whole truth, that this narrow sight colours our view, that not all people look at the world through our glasses, and (important!): that there is **an active part** in ourselves that stabilizes this structure bound feeling and thinking every day anew. It does not feel like this, but try:

*If you would like to do a little **exercise** tomorrow morning, you can observe 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 is your well-known music for the day? Or do you open up to the richness of life including surprising melodies and rhythms?*

Try the same thing in the evening before you go to sleep: How do you „remember“ your day? Of all the hundreds of events and issues that happened: Which ones do you choose to be with you again, to colour your memory?

When I use the word “choose” you may notice that I do not like the old idea that it is only the environment, which causes pain, limitations and deformation and that I only have to free myself from these biographical or cultural restrictions. 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 way of being influences my inner world and the world around me.

Even if we find ourselves in a stuck state, a “frozen whole” (Gendlin 1964), we are not “ill” or “disturbed. But parts of us do not answer to fresh and new inputs, we meet life with stereotype reactions, there is no ability or willingness to respond in a different way. We cannot get to that inner experiencing place any more from which new meaning could arise. If these patterns are strong and the narrowing almost complete, even 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.

It is absolutely important to distinguish between these two movements in therapy: the cyclic movement which again and again carries forward our experiencing– and the turning around in never-ending circles while we remain in a structure bound pattern.

During their training, talking to each other and learning from each other, our trainees may get a sense of the importance and intensity of those structure bound aspects in their own lives. They experience how ashamed they are of all the hidden aspects of these feelings and that it is not so easy to talk about them to the group. And how relieving it is to be accepted and respected by others even with these parts of themselves! How crucial it is to get honest feedback, to hear all the experiential responses and the quick bias-responses of their peers. And then to learn together what interaction would be helpful.

And they will never forget how long the work lasts until these patterns loosen, because there has been so much identity building around them for such a long time. As sometimes, as we all know, a narrow place is more than a “part”, it has become a lifestyle, a habit, a way of being, with sometimes severe breakdowns and a lot of despair – but nevertheless a strange kind of “home”. To know this makes our students patient and empathic, with themselves and with their future clients.

So in our trainings we try to infect and inspire our trainees with our 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 world around them. And although a big amount of translation is sometimes needed to understand each other, in training-groups and teams and networks it needs them all, the talents and qualities of all can come together to avoid one-sidedness. I will come back to this subject later on.

III. Body

When I look at the importance of the body in psychotherapy, I am happy that nowadays to acknowledge the body in psychotherapy is no longer such a monstrosity in our approach as it used to be in the beginning. But nevertheless our young colleagues are still confronted with this typical frown “Oh, really? You are working with the body”?? - and it is still like this: Whenever we introduce our work to colleagues, we immediately are admonished that we have to be careful, that there are important ethical questions and that there has to be a lot of supervision because we move on a dangerous ground –as if leaving the body out were less dangerous.

Students often feel attracted to a training, which includes the body. Most of them have had some experience in body therapy, some of them know focusing as a body oriented “technique”.

But often, when entering our training program, they misunderstand something, as to become a client-centred and experiential **body**-psychotherapist means not at all simply “adding some body techniques to the approach”. Something has to change in their whole bodily being. So here is the fascinating balance of doing and being again!

When we started to design our curriculum more than 25 years ago, it was self-evident to us, that leaving out the body would be a short-sighted interpretation of Rogers’ concept of a “person”, “an organismic being”, which has been cemented by the German translation <Gesprächspsychotherapie>.

It seemed to us more than unjustified to avoid parts of our whole being. All processes in us are directly linked together, and a separation between “soul” and “spirit” and “mind” and “body” or between various modalities into which the felt sense can unfold (Geiser 2003; Geiser 2004) is as artificial as are all separations within a living being.

Mia Leijssen said in her speech in Egmont last summer: “Experiential psychotherapies have a common ground; not only do they recognize the importance of the relation, they also recognize that the expressions of the client should be lived through, or felt through the body.”

Yes, I agree. But what “body” do we mean? Mia rightly pointed out that there is a confusion. Is it the “body from inside”, when we ask ourselves how we feel today, what is going on inside? Or the “situational body”, like Gendlin calls it? Do we mean the body from outside, which we see and touch? What about our physical, biological, breathing, pulsating, living body?

In our training we use various kinds of bodywork. We use touch in different ways. We most of all do “dialogical body work”, asking and responding and finding rhythm and meaning together. I will give an example later on.

For some of our trainees this means to remember long-neglected modes of relating which have to do with our physical and biological being, not only with our feelings and our thinking. For some of them this means learning something new, and not only about the body of the client, but about themselves.

So, our trainees learn to get to know their bodies, to build up a strong interest in their own organismic world. They try to maintain a high level of self-awareness, not only awareness of thoughts and feelings, but also of all these subtle or distinctive reactions in their bodies.

That means: How do I breathe? How is my body shaped, how does it move, what did I learn during my socialisation about movement, touch, posture, health, beauty, sexuality? Can I be aware of tensions and flows in my body? How does my body react when I am angry or sad? How do I recognise that I feel close to someone or that I draw back inwardly?

They ask themselves: Can I really be bodily alive, accept my weaknesses and strengths, just my bodily being, can I trust the flow of the organism in a deep way? Can I feel comfortable in my body, in touch with my sensual needs and capacities?

Our trainees spend a lot of time on exercises: breathing-exercises, half an hour every morning. Sitting still for another half hour to find out how they cope with doing nothing but breathing, without movement. Dancing and walking to experience themselves in movement.

They learn or relearn to be in a bodily way with others: to touch and being touched, to hold and being held. They give massages to each other, learning how different bodies feel like under their hands.

All these themes must be part of the training to get accustomed to touch and to the bodily living together in a group and between them. It takes a long time to deepen these experiences, and we do it again and again. And we ask them to go on with this learning process in their everyday-life.

Then the second step of learning bodywork turns to the clients:

What does it mean to be interested in the world of my clients in a bodily way? I want to know how this person lives in his or her body, not in the sense of only collecting information about their bodily living, but to deeply understand and be able to accept.

So people in our training groups learn to look, to touch, to ask their peers: tell me, show me, yes, now I can feel it, describe it from within, make this movement again, I didn't get the meaning in your inner world. I'll tell you what I see and what sort of echo comes up in my body, show me your way of breathing, I'll try it out (we call this bodily mirroring), ah, if I breathe this way I feel so and so, and how is it for you?...

It helps their understanding that they have the opportunity to get to know as many various kinds of living bodily as possible during their training (different forms of breathing, of posture, of movement) so that they can try to really understand the world of another person who is living a very different life.

They learn to make suggestions to widen their clients' perception, always relying on the client for the direction of the next movement.

They ask for example: Do you realize that you breathe in this or that way while you are speaking? What would it be to breathe another way? They can offer small movements just beside the usual, just try - does it feel differently? How would it be to look from this side? And then they wait and see, whether the client can pick up the suggestion or not (for that aim it has to be near the usual, but new enough), whether apprehensions arise just as: <but if I try this, it might look silly> or: <if I breathe this way I'll burst into tears and can never stop it>. Or they try carefully to explore the new field together, again and again, and in the course of time alternatives establish, choices can become possible.

Our trainees learn to use touch in a therapeutic way. For instance they can try to make suggestions non-verbally, or only with the body, or try a body-dialogue for example between their hand and the shoulder of their clients: asking with the hand, the shoulder responds, finding out different ways of attunement and moving together: leaning with the back against the hands of the therapist, pulling the shoulder back to get free, or trying a little fight

to measure their strength, or trying out what kind of pressure it needs to feel safe or supported by the therapist's hands.

In working with the body, too, the first step is always acceptance: tell me, show me, let me share your inner world as well as possible, so that I can understand why you breathe this way, why you think that way, and what it means to you. Just stay where you are. Nothing at all is wrong; nothing has to be changed at the beginning. You had good reasons to shape your body in this way. We will try to understand. And perhaps after a while we can start a little dialogue.

"To resist any kind of immediate impulse to change something is an important element of psychotherapy", Jobst Finke writes (Finke, 2002, 36)

For me as a client-centred body psychotherapist, this is the most distinctive difference to other schools of body-orientated psychotherapy, which are rooted in a psychoanalytical background. In these orientations you look at the body as masked, armoured, ill, you have to free the energy, to loosen the blocks (because you as therapist are an expert who knows for example what a block in the shoulder segment stands for...), it's you who have to sometimes push the client into another state of being. This means being an expert in the sense of the term as Rogers deeply declined it. That is why we can never just adopt techniques like a special way of touch or massage from another orientation without finding out whether it is compatible with our inner convictions and attitudes. And the most important issue in the client-centred approach is that it has to do with relationship! It is not about change in a single person (in German: "Ein-Personen-Paradigma"), it is about the two of us, the "Between".

Stanley Keleman, a body therapist, writes in a book about somatic bonding (Keleman 1986, 28): "Some therapeutic circles harbour the illusion that the organism knows what is best for it. But that is often not true. An organism only knows what is best for it in a field of responsiveness".

Or maybe we can carry forward Gendlin's concepts in "A Process Model: Could it be possible that a client's process cannot find a special kind of symbolization out of his or her own "individual" implicit? That there are certain cycles that need another responding body to carry forward the process?

All these are interesting questions.

IV. What is a "good" training?

A good training should enable our trainees to be good professionals, but in our orientation it also means the development of the whole person.

Besides all the things I have said before the following points have proved to be essential:

- Drawing distinctions

- Allowing that there are different ways to see reality
- Living together for parts of the training
- Changing roles (being client or therapist or supervisor alternately)
- Learning in different settings
- Learning from each other
- Learning in a cyclic structure
- Engaging in a group process
- Being able to think beyond the individual
- Developing interests beyond psychology and therapy (art, music, literature, nature...)

And (my last point):

- Becoming a colleague

At the end of the training, after getting the diploma, our former trainees are psychotherapists. And, from now on, they are – or are developing to be - our colleagues.

Now, how about becoming a colleague?

There are two issues:

- Becoming a colleague to us, the former trainers

This takes time and patience for all of us, and it means leaving gradually behind the respective roles student and teacher. We prepare it carefully at the end of the training and the process should go on during the years to follow.

- Becoming a colleague in the field of psychotherapists

Should training prepare our future colleagues for this issue as well? Yes, I think so. When I look at all the quarrels not only in the PCA, but in our whole profession, I think that we badly need ideas or better: a revision of old ideas to build a sort of „professional collegueship/collegiality“ in our relationships as therapists.

Last year after the Egmont Conference I wrote an article for a German journal about this topic (Geiser, 2003). There I proposed to evaluate whether those qualities, skills and attitudes mentioned above, which are part of our training, could be of some help for our improvement within the contexts of collegiality in the political area: how we express ourselves in public, how we think and discuss theoretically, how we work together in an association.

I propose:

1. To apply our knowledge about structure-bound patterns and the wisdom of the core conditions for the work in groups of colleagues
2. To apply the focusing approach to check out one-sidedness and bias

3. To use David Bohm's dialogue (Bohm 1996; Isaacs 1999) as a possibility for the group to start a new way of thinking.

Some ideas:

1:

Would it make a difference if we really listened to each other in issues concerning our professional peer groups? To listen in the way we are accustomed to in professional work? To listen empathically and try to meet the other just for a moment in his world, in his frame of reference and listen from that place, how and why a colleague has developed a special theory or an insight or a proposal? To accept (which, as we know, doesn't mean that we agree!) that someone has drawn his or her own conclusions from a theory or from his practical work? And to experience all resonances inside and give them words to make them available to the other person and our relationship? That means: Really wanting to know, really being interested in someone and in his work.

The colleague, after being heard for some time, is obliged on her part to thoroughly check the feedback, to be open also to critical statements, to the mirroring of her own structure bound parts and how they influence the theory-building and her thinking, and how they show up in public and in the contact with colleagues.

Obviously, most of us stress themes partly from our own structure bound thinking, and that is totally o.k. – if we do not forget it and stay open to comments - and if we do not mistake them for truth. To talk about all this in our circle of colleagues is not at all natural– but our approach has all the instruments we need to do this! We are all committed to lifelong supervision – or intervention to check our skills and our attitude again and again concerning our professional work. Why don't we do the same thing with regard to our professional relationships? So often we react to an underlying subtext, to the structure bound manner in which someone speaks or behaves with an automatic answer from our own narrow places.. And I have realized that we apparently lose all the qualities of interaction and communication we are trained in as soon as we sit in circles where themes like power, ethics, money, impact or the “correctness” of a theory come up. I plead that we use a disciplined version of our professional skills in these contexts as well.

2.

Whenever there is the danger of getting stuck in one-sidedness, bias or thoughts you repeat over and over again, it is helpful to remember that there is another possibility we can learn from Focusing, from the experiential approach: to pause for a moment and ask ourselves: what is all this about? When I think about ALL THIS, what comes up in my body? And then this “something more” slowly begins to unfold, we breathe more freely; a new symbolization far beyond the already known comes up. To do this is an irritation of old patterns, and sort of renouncing old ways of thinking or feeling. It encourages a new organisation of

complexity. I am deeply convinced that we should give in to this little inner movement from time to time in hot-tempered discussions to realise one's own stuck places and to allow the emergence of new meaning.

3.

If we really want to learn a discipline which is suitable for groups who want to confront existential and controversial questions, I propose that we study a method like the dialogue work David Bohm developed – we train all our groups in this practice and have had an ongoing group in Zürich for 7 years – a very challenging and deeply satisfying work!

Conclusion:

Is it wise to transfer the knowledge we have from our training into the world, into the area of collegueship, politics and social change? Yes, I think so. I hope that the new generation of client-centred therapists, our young colleagues, do not lose so much energy and strength in collegial struggles as some of us did in the beginning. I am convinced that they can walk into the future with more optimism, pride and confidence if the fruitful and radical knowledge of our approach proves of value in a reliable way in fields of professional collegueship. And perhaps this form of honest communication could be of use for other problems and challenges in the world as well!

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