



Book Review

Integrated Media and Book Review Editor:

Dr Francis C. Biley

Submissions address:

IHCS, Bournemouth University, 1st Floor Royal London House, Christchurch Road, Bournemouth, Dorset BH1 3LT

Humanizing Psychiatry and Mental Health Care: The Challenge of the Person-centred Approach

Rachel Freeth

Radcliffe Publishing, Oxford/New York

2007, 175 pages, £24.95

ISBN-10 185775 619 3

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the death of Carl Rogers and the commencement of my nursing training. It was during my training that I was first formally introduced to the philosophy and techniques of ‘person-centred’ counselling. Indeed, for years I thought unconditional positive regard and counselling were synonymous. Our course was saturated with Roger’s philosophy and a number of my most inspiring teachers regarded Rogers with quasi-religious awe. This was the era of the grand theory and not surprisingly the most famous North American counsellor and philosopher influenced most if not all theorists. Roger’s ideas relating to the actualizing tendency of people, and the conditions for growth and development influenced the practice of nurse education independently and via nursing theory. However, reflecting on Roger’s ideas in relation to my experience working in psychiatric settings has caused me some cognitive dissonance. The ideals of humanistic care are also sometimes at odds with the reality of psychiatric practice. It was against this backdrop that I eagerly agreed to review this book, hoping that it might illuminate a path towards more humane if not humanistic mental health care.

The author Rachel Freeth is a medical doctor who detested much of her training and professional culture, and felt ‘... disillusioned, angry and burnt out’ (p. 3) early in her psychiatric training. Some 8 years ago she undertook a 1-year diploma in person-centred counselling but acknowledges that she has largely practiced as a psychiatrist within the National Health Service

(NHS) and found it difficult to integrate counselling practice within this role. Writing this book, she says, was a way to give meaning to her experience of depression. The aims she said were to introduce the person-centred approach, introduce person-centred practitioners to the context of psychiatry and to explore something of what may be involved in practising the person-centred approach within mental health services.

It is written in the first person and largely present tense. This is a little jarring when referring to the late Carl Rogers but it is clear that, for the author, Rogers is very much alive and deserving of reverence. When discussing Rogers, the style tends towards proselytising, e.g. ‘For me, these passages ... capture a breath-taking sensitivity and compassion, as well as a total readiness to hear, sense and understand whatever it is a person might be experiencing ... Can I, too, embody this “way of being”?’ (p. 141). In contrast, the author expresses unreserved negative regard for the NHS, its culture, management, priorities and the psycho-noxious climate of its facilities. This is perhaps the most dominant thread throughout the book.

The book is aimed at a wide audience. It is a slim volume at 175 pages and 10 chapters. The first two chapters (36 pages) provide a brief introduction to notions of ‘person-centredness’ as defined by Rodgers and his theory of personality development. These descriptions are brief and sketchy but the reader is referred to additional reading including the original texts. The next four chapters address issues of power and expertise, the nature of and models of mental disorder, diagnosis and the medical model, and questions around healing and cure. These chapters are critical and sometimes aligned with anti-psychiatry sentiment. However, there is nothing new or particularly radical in these sections for a well-read nursing audience. Indeed, these topics are routinely dealt with in a more articulate and scholarly manner in this and many other nursing journals. Chapters 7 to 9 loosely

Book review

address practical applications of the person-centred approach. These chapters remain largely theoretical with much attention given to obstacles to being rather than how to be person-centred with little in the way of case material to assist. The final small chapter deals with clinical supervision and the author's experience of it.

It is important to know something of the author in order to make some judgement about the credibility of her opinions as they are frequently and authoritatively expressed, span a wide range of topics and are rarely backed up by cited research. These opinions are generally framed as lamentations about some aspect of the world not being as the author would like and often commence with the word 'Unfortunately'. For example, the author laments that health professionals who attach 'primary value' to the importance of relationship are becoming rarer (p. 123), that little emphasis is placed on self-awareness or examining subjectivity in assessment processes (p. 76) and that mental health services are '... toxic, psychologically disturbed and dysfunctional' (p. 105). For my part, I often found myself in agreement with the author's opinions but irritated by the overgeneralizations.

I found that the way the author expressed opinions provoked defensiveness rather than invited critical engagement with the subject. For example, the author expresses 'amazement' that there is so little formal education and discussion of Cartesian dualism in the preparation of mental health professionals (p. 64) and that nursing training introduces Rogers in superficial terms (p. 3). I wonder how the author can make such claims regarding nursing education and I feel drawn to defend what I would ordinarily choose not to. My experience of nursing education in three countries has been that there is a considerable emphasis on the philosophy of science and phenomenology and increasingly so as one engages in postgraduate study. The influence of Rogers on education and 'student-centred' learning was not touched upon in the book.

The author states that her own book is a work in progress but fails to appreciate that the theorizing of whole disciplines is also dynamic. The author criticizes Watkins (2001) for missing '... the full distinctiveness and radical nature of the person-centred approach' (p. 13). Nursing has borrowed heavily and integrated many humanistic concepts into its theories about care in recent years and owes a debt to Rogers but also to others. It is the assimilation,

synthesis and amalgam of concepts into theory and practice rather than puritanical adherence to a set of practices or a belief system that is most likely to make a difference in humanizing mental health care. The author fails to do service to the other humanizing influences in mental health care and how these may be aligned to, derive from the same philosophical traditions, or in part have evolved from Roger's theories, e.g. strength, salutogenic, partnership and personal recovery approaches.

The author cites a limited number of nurse authors which suggests a rare openness to nursing literature. However, it is remarkable that the author missed Liam Clarke's (1999) critique of Rogers and therapy in general. Neither does it address the vexing problems of how one maintains empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard in the context of working with people who may be difficult, deluded or dangerous. Instead, it traverses a huge range of ideas but seldom stops long enough to develop any fully.

There is no clear thesis embodied in this work that suggests a way forward in terms of humanizing institutional mental health care. The author frequently puts forward how noxious the practice environment is in the NHS and alludes to incompatibility between implementing a person-centred approach to practice and prevailing conditions. In the words of Carl Rogers (1961, p. 23), 'No other person's ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience' and a more hopeful, positive book might have evolved had the author had more positive experiences to convey. In my own experience, I have encountered a number of health professionals who embody many of the ideals of the archetypal Rogerian counsellor and are beacons of hope in a sea of distress. For myself, I find it impossible to maintain 'unconditional positive regard' and think it beyond the pale to expect others to do so in the context of mainstream mental health care. Notwithstanding the negative impact of medical and managerial hegemony which the author highlights, there is room for people with varying dispositions and theoretical orientations in mental health care and this is a great strength.

One is left wondering if the conditions for growth that Rogers put forward for healing the individual might apply to making systems (e.g. mental health systems) more functional. An infusion of Rogerian optimism might be helpful but it would not be a total cure. Nevertheless, Rogers still remains relevant and

his major works are in an accessible, understandable style that have kept them in-print (and almost always checked out in the case of my library). The reader is better to go to the primary source for an overview of Rogers, and perhaps visit Clarke (1999) for a critique. However, the subplot to this book is the struggle of a doctor who deeply admires and would like to emulate Rogers but can only sometimes live up to the ideal. The main protagonist is conflicted at every turn and struggles with the expectations of others, the responsibilities of paid roles and the desire to discover and do the right thing. This story in itself is worth reading and is one that many nurses might relate to.

MR RICHARD LAKEMAN DipNsg BN BA
Hons(Nursing) PG Dip(Psychotherapy)

Lecturer
School of Nursing, Dublin City University
Glasnevin
Dublin 9
Ireland
E-mail: richardlakeman@dcu.ie

References

- Clarke L. (1999) *Challenging Practice in Mental Health Nursing: A Critical Approach*. Routledge, New York.
- Rogers C.R. (1961) *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. Houghton Mifflin Co., New York.
- Watkins P. (2001) *Mental Health Nursing: The Art of Compassionate Care*. Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford.