

From Prouty's Pre-Therapy to a Person-Centred Paradigm:
Encompassing Freud's Primary Process
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All theory is merely speculation in the light of significant facts.

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In this year's February edition of PCQ I described attending a workshop presentation on Garry Prouty's Pre-Therapy conducted by Dion Van Werde. I recounted how inspired I had been by the workshop and how I had gained a fuller appreciation of the genius of Garry Prouty in his development of Pre-Therapy as an 'evolution' of both Carl Rogers' client-centred therapy and Eugene Gendlin's experiential therapy (Ellingham, 2014). At the end of the article I concluded that:

Garry and Dion have shed a great deal of light on particulars of the process whereby individuals experientially shift from a psychotic mode of sense-making to an everyday, commonsense mode. Garry emphasizes that it is a symbolization process that is taking place, a process that he sees Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer as elucidating.

Having extensively studied the philosophical ideas of these two thinkers, I believe there is scope to further integrate Garry's ideas with theirs, and thereby shed still more light on the nature of psychotic sense-making from a person-centred perspective. (p. 5)

I also publicly stated my resolve to write an article attempting such an integration. For what had particularly caught my attention in Garry Prouty's theorizing was his adoption of Cassirer's and Langer's premise that the human being is an 'Animal Symbolicum', a symbolizing animal, and thereby his coming 'to think of humankind in an essential way as motivated to symbolize experience' (1994, p. 69).

Langer refers to the transforming of 'the current of experience into symbols', a pattern of transformation that Prouty deems illustrated in the psychotherapeutic change process of his formerly psychotic clients: a change process in which incomprehensible psychotic hallucinations became transformed into common-sense narrative symbolizing of traumatic experiences from a client's early life (p. 69)—a key example that where a young man's psychotic hallucination of a 'very evil...dark purple picture' became transformed into the memory of a 'mean' nun who had beaten him as a child (1994, pp. 73ff).

In accord with Rogers, Prouty conceives such psychotherapeutic change as powered by the 'the self-actualizing or self-formative tendency', even as he follows Gendlin by interpreting psychotic experiencing, and hallucinations in particular, as a circumstance in which 'the Experiential process [i.e. the working of 'the self-actualizing/self-formative tendency'] is lacking, stuck, deadened in old hurt stoppages and in the disconnection from the world', (p. 3; Gendlin, 1970 quoted in Prouty, 1994, p. 26).

Through the practice of Pre-Therapy, Prouty had clearly unstuck the stuckness, unstopped the stoppages, and facilitated the ongoing flow of the Experiential, [or ‘experiencing’] process. However, whereas Gendlin spoke of an implicit bodily felt meaning being symbolized and carried forward, in Prouty’s case, the ‘carrying forward’ process clearly involved the symbolic transformation of the implicit meaning contained in an hallucination (in the guise, say, of the very evil, purple picture) becoming explicit (in the guise of the verbally symbolized memory of childhood abuse).

Prouty thus speaks of the hallucination as ‘an expressive transformation of real life experience into image form’, of ‘hallucinatory symbols’ and of ‘the hallucinatory mode of symbolizing experience’ (1994, p. 71; 2002, p. 6; 1986, p. 99).

But self-evidently the hallucination does not constitute an everyday verbal symbol, as when the above-mentioned client used the ‘word’ nun to denote a woman in religious garb, and the word ‘mean’ to describe her character. To take account of the hallucination’s expressive and meaningful make-up and at the same time acknowledge that it was not a symbol proper, Prouty chose to label this ‘deeply primitivized mode of “transforming the current of experience into symbols” a ‘pre-symbol’ (1986, p. 99).

The advantage of using the prefix ‘pre-’ was that in the case of the hallucinating client Prouty was dealing with an individual absorbed in psychotic experiencing and thereby out of psychological contact with the therapist. Thus the therapist’s interactions with the client were ‘pre-’ psychotherapy, as normally understood: specifically ‘pre-relationship’, with respect to Rogers’ characterization of the necessary and sufficient conditions of psychotherapeutic personality change; and ‘pre-process’, with respect to Gendlin’s conception of the carrying forward symbolizing of the experiencing process (1994, pp. 26, 36; 2008, p. 113). In Prouty’s terms what one was talking about was ‘Pre-Symbolic psychotherapy’ involving ‘Pre-Symbolic Experiencing’ wherein ‘schizophrenic hallucinatory experiencing leads to the integration of reality-based “not-conscious” experiences’ (1994, p. 72).

The above, then, is an extremely brief overview of certain of Prouty’s key theoretical ideas linking with Cassirer’s and Langer’s conception of the human being as a symbolizing animal.

What follows is my attempt to seamlessly interweave ideas drawn from Cassirer and Langer with those of Prouty, an enterprise which as I pursued it served to indicate how I might broaden the scope of person-centred theory in general by incorporating certain major concepts from other counselling/psychotherapy theories.

Stemming from a key insight to do with Prouty’s characterization of hallucinations and the theoretical views of Cassirer and Langer, below I sketch how Freud’s core concept of the primary process might be encompassed in a person-centred scheme that also includes the cognitive psychology concept of information processing.

The Prouty-Cassirer/Langer insight and beyond

Susanne Langer was one of the great philosophers of the 20th century and, perhaps because she was a woman, one of the least appreciated. She was a PhD student at Harvard under Alfred North Whitehead, the doyen of organismic or process philosophers, whose greatness has also yet to be fully appreciated.

Towards the end of the 1920s, having completed her PhD under Whitehead, Langer read and absorbed the intellectual insights contained in Cassirer's three volume *magnum opus*, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*. This work was not translated from German into English until thirty years later under the title, *The philosophy of symbolic forms*. Langer's first language was German and she was both able to comprehend its significance and, in her later theorizing, to interweave Cassirer's ideas with those of Whitehead—that Cassirer was a cousin of Kurt Goldstein and interlinked his own ideas with those of Goldstein here highlights a chain of organismic thought extending not only to Fritz Perls, who worked in Goldstein's laboratory, but also to Carl Rogers whose thinking was 'enriched' by Goldstein's notion of self-actualization (Rogers, 1951).

What then was the key insight which struck me regarding the theoretical views of Cassirer and Langer as they pertain to Prouty's characterization of the psychotic hallucination?

Put simply, it was this:

that which Prouty, with reference to psychotic hallucination, terms a 'pre-symbol' is exactly that which Cassirer and Langer, with reference to mythic consciousness and art, term alternatively a 'non-discursive', 'intensive', or 'presentational' symbol.

And, So What? you might say.

The significance of this equation of 'pre-symbol' and 'presentational symbol' lies in the fact that presentational or non-discursive symbolizing is to all intents and purposes exactly that which Sigmund Freud's terms the primary process, an equivalence that Langer clearly elucidates in a 1949 article entitled *On Cassirer's theory of language and myth*.

According to Langer, Cassirer's in-depth research into humanity's myths and mythologies had resulted in the determining that the operational principles of the mythic mode of experiencing (a mode rooted in the functioning of presentational symbols, inclusive of the first usages of language) are exactly the same operational principles that Freud discovered to be at work in dreams, principles that Freud labelled the principles of primary process thought, and which he subsequently deemed to govern all manifestations of the so-called 'Unconscious', not least in psychosis.

'The 'dream work' of Freud's "unconscious" mental mechanism', Langer therefore declares, 'is almost exactly the "mythic mode" which Cassirer describes as the primitive form of ideation, wherein an intense feeling is spontaneously expressed in a symbol, an

image seen in something or formed for the mind's eye in an excited imagination' (1949, p. 395).

'Such expression', she summarizes, 'is effortless and therefore unexhausting; its products are images charged with meanings, but the meanings remain implicit, so that the emotions they command seem to be centered on the image rather than on anything it merely conveys; in the image, which may be a vision, a gesture, a sound-form (musical or a word as readily as an external object), many meanings may be concentrated, many ideas telescoped and interfused, and incompatible emotions simultaneously expressed' (pp. 395-6).

By way of illustration, Langer translates from the German a number of Cassirer's descriptions of mythic mode thought:

In this mode, according to Cassirer, 'there is a complete lack of any clear division between "imagining" and "real" perception, between wish and fulfilment, between image and object...for mythic thought and "experience" there is a continuous and fluid transition from the world of dream to objective reality' (p. 397).

In the world of myth, too, 'all objects are benignant or malignant, friendly or inimical, familiar or uncanny, alluring and fascinating or repellent or threatening...Mythical perception is always impregnated with these emotional qualities. Whatever is seen or felt is surrounded by a special atmosphere—an atmosphere of joy, or grief, of anguish, of excitement, of exultation or depression' (ibid.).

And, 'when external reality is not merely viewed and contemplated, but overcomes a man [sic] in sheer immediacy, with emotions of fear or hope, or terror or wish fulfillment: then the spark jumps somehow across, the tension finds release, as the subjective excitement becomes objectified and confronts the mind as a god or daemon' (p. 396). At such times, 'the entire self is given up to a single impression, is possessed by it' (p. 396).

'To all these passages', says Langer, 'Freud could subscribe wholeheartedly; the *morphology* of the "mythic mode" is essentially that of dream, phantasy, infantile thinking, and "unconscious" ideation, which he himself discovered and described' (p. 398).

Further endorsement of such an equating of non-discursive/presentational symbolization and Freud's primary process comes from Charles Rycroft, the psychoanalyst who compiled *A critical dictionary of psychoanalysis*. Ignorant of Cassirer's identification of the non-discursive symbol, Rycroft links its origination with Langer. Thus we find Rycroft preferring 'the use of Susanne Langer's terms non-discursive and discursive symbolization to make the distinction between the two different types of thinking which orthodox Freudian analysts make by referring to the primary and secondary processes' (1981, pp. 13-14).

Accepting, then, that Cassirer and Langer's conception of presentational symbolizing is equivalent to Freud's primary process ideation, where does this leave us in terms of integrating Cassirer's and Langer's ideas with those of Prouty?

For his part, Prouty acknowledges in name a definite connection between his notion of the pre-symbol and Freud's conception of the primary process. So, for instance, Prouty comments that 'Freud included both the dream and the hallucination in his concept of primary process' and insofar as 'Freud described the dream as the 'Royal Road to the Unconscious', he, Prouty, wishes us to keep in mind the fact that 'the hallucination [as a 'daymare'] is also a 'Royal Road to the Unconscious' (2008, pp. 73 & 74).

Beyond this, we find Prouty's portrayal of the formal characteristics of the hallucination as pre-symbol closely concordant with those ascribed to the presentational symbol: the image itself being taken as real, being imbued with feeling and being meaningful—that meaningfulness somehow referring to another object yet still contained in the symbol. Additional features are those of chronological time not existing (everything happens in the now), lack of differentiation between a part and a whole (a part of the whole *is* the whole), and like things being taken to be identical (your therapist is like mother, therefore she *is* mother).

Consider, for example, how the above characterizations of the stereotypical features of the presentational mythic image are exemplified in Prouty's phenomenological descriptions of the hallucinatory imaging of the client who eventually 'recaptures a real memory of being beaten by a nun who had punished him for not completing his school lessons' (2008, p. 172).

Vignette presentations by Prouty of this client feature from Prouty's first published work in 1976 until his final major publication in 2008. Tape-recordings of the case helped him feature it in this way, but Prouty was right, in my view, to give it such prominence. For not only does it throw light on the psychotherapeutic process vis-à-vis psychotic experiencing, but it also illuminates the nature of psychosis, per se.

Prouty's initial written account of the man beaten by the nun features in a discussion headed 'Primary Process' (1976, p. 293). He describes the client as a '19-year-old male' who is a 'psychotic retardate', 'diagnosed as hebephrenic schizophrenic'—reference to this diagnosis is dropped in subsequent publications (p. 293). Here are snippets of statements by the client taken from Prouty's last published account:

It's evil this thing... That's why I don't want anything to do with it. I'm tempted by it, you know. It's so small but it has so much strength and wants to rip me apart... The evil thing is a picture. It's a dark purple picture that hangs there... It's very big and large... It's evil. It's like a demon, a bad demon. It wants to chop me up... It's with the past and it's not going to come back any more. It's over with, you know, and talking about the trees and the flowers and the grass... It's like air. It's up above me... it's very pressing, it forces, a lot of force to it and it wants to grab me... The feeling is in the picture. (2008, pp. 168-9)

Here are statements from a later session when the client recounts hallucinating a

Big orange, square thing. It's square and it's orange and I hate it. It don't like me because it hates me...and I get scared and excited over it too...It makes noises...it makes me uncomfortable...it's real...I see it over there...It makes sounds, too. (pp. 170-1).

And here's what the client has to say at a much later session even as he is also is also experiencing auditory hallucinations:

Well, it ain't real, you know, and she ain't real...She has orange hair and yellow eyes...She's very pretty. She loves getting mean when I'm bad....That scares me a lot...It's over with and it's not coming back...She scares me. But as long as I'm good....she's a friend...Yellow eyes, orange hair she has. Reminds me of a dragon...Her eyes like that. (pp. 171-172)

The client's hallucinations as described above clearly illustrate, in my view, the principles of presentational symbolizing as characterized by Cassirer—aside from importantly illustrating developmental change in the nature of the hallucinations (a major interest of Prouty's).

In relation to Prouty's further theorizing, two of his other accounts of client hallucinations merit brief highlighting also:

That of the woman who hallucinated the real presence of a huge snake, a hallucination that disappeared once she had recalled the experience of her mother trying to kill her: 'She reached the clarity', states Prouty, 'that the snake was her homicidal mother' (1994, p. 86);

That of the man who hallucinated the a pink elephant and whose experiencing shifted in a single session to verbally describing his mother as being 'big and ugly like an elephant', trampling him 'like and elephant' and who 'smothers [him]... emotionally' (Prouty & Pietrzak, 1988, pp. 435-6)

Stemming from the confluence of thought between Prouty, Freud, Cassirer and Langer, below I state some of my conclusions regarding the further development of Pre-Therapy theory in relation to psychotic processing and psychotherapeutic change.

Conclusions and further theorizing

Margaret Warner (2002) has criticized Prouty over the way he conceptualizes psychotherapeutic change in relation to his clients. Warner draws attention to Prouty explaining the nature of such change in terms of what I have previously termed a 'quasi-Freudian' manner (Ellingham, 2001).

Originally Gendlin (1964), but also I myself (Ellingham, 2001, 2002), had criticized Rogers for the way he, like Freud, presumes psychotherapeutic change to involve 'pre-formed', pre-existing mental entities (ideas, memories, feelings) moving from a place outside

consciousness ('the Unconscious'?) into consciousness, or, to the change the analogy, having a light shone upon them as they lurk in 'denied to awareness' darkness.

The presence of this same quasi-Freudian trait in Prouty's theorizing is evidenced, for instance, when he states that 'the hallucination is a literal fragment of the unconscious' (1994, p. 88). It is also present when (a) in referring to the snake as a 'disguised' representation of the mother Prouty concludes that the woman 'reached the clarity that the snake was her homicidal mother' (1994, p. 86); and when (b) in relation to the young man's hallucinatory imagery 'processing into a nun', Prouty declares that the man 'recaptures a real memory of being beaten by a nun who punished him for not completing his school lessons' (2008, p. 172).

Perhaps not so obviously, it lurks, too, in the way Prouty construes the linkage between psychotherapeutic change and the remembering of past trauma, a circumstance wherein 'hallucinatory processing leads to a realistic and traumatic etiology' (2008, p. 173).

Here the point I wish to make is that while as a young child a client may have been traumatized by being physical and sexually abused, the memory of that experience does not sit pre-formed and pristinely preserved in a domain beyond consciousness waiting for its disguise to be penetrated, the shades to be raised, so that it can be apprehended in its real and true form.

Useful (arguably) though it may be, such a model of psychotherapeutic change gets us in all sorts of insoluble conceptual conundrums, not least that of determining the nature of an 'unfelt feeling'. Fortunately, help is at hand and it comes via the theorizing of Cassirer and Langer, Langer in particular—once we equate Prouty's pre-symbol with that of the presentational or non-discursive symbol.

For Langer places presentational symbolizing within the context of the emergence of human sense-making as a whole. She furnishes us with an elaborate evolutionary account of how body-based animal sense-making became superseded by the presentational symbolizing of mythic consciousness and how in due course it became superseded by the discursive, narrative symbolizing characteristic of our everyday consciousness (Langer, 1972, 1982)).

Assuming, in line with Rogers (1951, pp. 488-9), a common pattern to the emergence of consciousness across the different perspectives of phylogeny, (the development of the human race), ontogeny (the development of the child), and therageny (the development of consciousness in the therapy client), Langer's phylogenetic scheme concords, in my view, with Jerome Bruner's (1964) scheme of the development of consciousness and information processing in the child, as a progression from bodily, sensorimotor/enactive sense-making to iconic sense-making dominated by imagery, to the discursive, narrative sense-making of everyday language—Kieran Egan's account of the development of human sense-making in *The Educated Mind* (1997) further fits with such a view.

Such an interpretation allows us to conceptualize the relationship between trauma and psychotic experiencing along lines posited by Bessel van der Kolk. As van der Kolk (1987) recounts,

Bruner and Postman...and Neisser identified three distinct modes of thought: enactive, iconic, and symbolic/linguistic. These three modes of representation closely parallel Piaget's notions of sensorimotor, preoperational, and operational thinking. Over the course of the development of a child, there is a shift from sensorimotor (action modes), to perceptual (iconic) representations to symbolic and linguistic modes of organization of experience....Amnesia can occur when traumatic experiences are encoded in sensorimotor and iconic form and therefore cannot be easily translated into the symbolic language necessary for linguistic retrieval. It is plausible that in situations of terror, the experience does not get processed in symbolic/linguistic forms, but tends to be organized on a sensorimotor or iconic level—as horrific images, visceral sensations, or fight/flight reactions. (1987, pp. 192-3)

Garry Prouty blazed a path in relieving the mental anguish of those whose traumatic experience is linguistically unprocessed and remains embedded at the sensorimotor and iconic levels. I believe he also pointed up the direction in which to proceed in further developing person-centred theory and the person-centred approach.

On the one hand, Prouty indicated that it is through the workings of Rogers' formative tendency that presentationally symbolised bodily feelings become holistically organized into the narrative/linguistic memory of a traumatic event—a linkage with Heinz Werner's 'orthogenetic principle (Werner & Kaplan, 1963); on the other, that non-verbal forms of psychotherapy take pride of place in helping those most seriously out of touch with everyday reality.

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