

**Breaking free from the embrace of ‘Non-Directivity’**  
**PCQ 2005?**

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In 1985 at a conference on psychotherapy held in Phoenix, Arizona, and less than 18 months before his death, Carl Rogers was asked a question regarding the term ‘non-directive’ as a label for the approach to psychotherapy that he and his colleagues had developed. ‘Certainly initially’, replied Rogers (1985), ‘the approach that we developed was a protest against what had been going on and so it was non-directive to separate it from directive, but then it became more and more focused on the person, then client-centered and person-centered became more appropriate terms’. ‘I think’, continued Rogers, ‘that those older terms [such as “non-directive” or “indirective”] have historical interest but not *current value*’ [my emphasis].

Sue Rowe’s bland book review of *Embracing Non-Directivity* edited by Brian Levitt (*Therapy Today*, November 2005, Vol. 16, No. 09) glosses over both the political nature of this work and the fact that it contains different authors’ contradictory definitions of ‘non-directivity’, a notion that, according to Levitt (2005: i & 5), ‘is the distinguishing feature of the revolutionary, and anti-authoritarian approach to psychotherapy and human relations developed by Carl Rogers’, ‘the foundation of an approach to therapy’.

The political nature of *Embracing Non-Directivity* relates to decades of effort by Barbara Brodley—Levitt’s mentor and the person whose influence underlies the production of this book—at preserving what she describes as a ‘relatively pure... form of client-centered therapy’ (Brodley, 1997:19). To do this Brodley has latched onto ‘non-directivity’, defined as ‘the non-directive attitude’, as the key notion for gauging whether or not particular developments of Rogers’ theory and practice are aberrations of client-centered therapy. In this respect, Brodley has been most exercised by what to her is the ‘aberration’ of experiential therapy (today titled ‘focusing-oriented therapy’) developed by Rogers’ student Eugene Gendlin. Other avant-garde developments of person-centered therapy have also met with the disapproval of Brodley and her fellow ‘non-directivists’, to such an extent that neither Dave Mearns nor Brian Thorne, the leading advocates of the person-centred approach in the UK, can be said to be ‘non-directively pure’.

Or can they? Whether they can or not relates to the second issue glossed over by Rowe, the fact that different authors in *Embracing Non-Directivity* define ‘non-directivity’ differently. The classic example of this concerns the startling claim by Marvin Frankel and Lisbeth Sommerbeck (2005) that, after his involvement in a big research project in Wisconsin in the early 1960s, Rogers ceased to be non-directive in his practice—in their terms, ‘non-directive’ and ‘client-centred’ Rogers-1 became ‘coercive’, ‘non-client-centred’ Rogers-2. They criticize Rogers-2 for his emphasis on congruence, castigating him, in particular, for ceasing to be ‘non-directive’ when he expressed positive feelings towards Gloria in the classic psychotherapy film. Further, as if berating Rogers were not enough, they also lambast Jerold Bozarth—after Brodley the most stalwart advocate of the notion of ‘non-directivity’ and contributor of two chapters to *Embracing Non-Directivity*—for being a follower of Rogers-2 and

likewise espousing a coercive, non-client-centred approach to therapy. Clearly, as Bozarth considers himself a quintessential exponent of ‘non-directivity’ and client-centred to the core, we are dealing with two different definitions of non-directivity—‘non-directivity-1’ and ‘non-directivity-2’, perhaps. In my reading of *Embracing Non-Directivity* there also appears to be a non-directivity 3, if not a 4 and 5.

With ‘confusing’ a common adjective used apropos ‘non-directivity’, *Embracing Non-Directivity* is valuable because it provides a clear snapshot of the unavoidable confusion that consistently surrounds the term. Rogers was smart enough to get this picture early and chose alternative terminology. As demonstrated by Margaret Warner (2000) and Dave Mearns and Mick Cooper (2005), authentic development of client-centred theory and practice involves taking the lead from Rogers and being clear on the lack of ‘current value’ in the something-and-nothing notion of ‘non-directivity’.

### References

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