

Hanging by a thread: the noose of non-directivity

PCQ 2012?

Ivan Ellingham

Pentas Associates

In his article *Non-directivity – the central thread* (PCQ, 2012), John Pratt takes issue with the views I have expressed in two earlier articles in PCQ: in ‘*The holey tale of the jumper*’ (2010), and in *Non-directivity in the historical context of the four Rogers* (2010).

To reprise the summary of my position regarding non-directivity: in the articles I attempted to justify ‘why I regard the idea of the person-centred therapist being non-directive (or non-coercive, or non-imposing) a useful rule of thumb in communicating unconditional positive regard, congruence, and empathy; why I deem the construct of non-directivity when defined as Raskin’s 1947 notion of the non-directive attitude to be a confused construct; why I don’t consider non-directivity in this sense to be a bedrock concept of the person-centred approach, and why I consider advocacy of non-directivity when so defined to have had and be having a *deadening* effect on the well-being and future development of the approach’.

At the risk of boring readers to death by further resuscitation of what for me, at any rate, is a rather dead duck issue, allow me to fire off a few bullet points at John Pratt’s criticisms of my ideas.

- I’ll take a passing comment first. John suggests that I might ‘even (disingenuously?)’ have asserted that non-directivity is ‘directive’. I have to say that I don’t regard the question mark after ‘disingenuously’ as tempering the suggestion that I was being disingenuous. I highlight this questioning of my integrity, of suggesting that, because I hold views different from his, questions must be raised about my character, because (a) I resent the suggestion; (b) I can name two other prominent defenders of the primary nature of non-directivity who have similarly resorted to such *ad hominem* tactics—one who questioned by emotional maturity, the other who questioned my ability as a therapist—and I’m getting tired of it. What it says to me is that being unable to counter my arguments on rational grounds the authors have had to resort to personal vilification.
- John states that he is ‘not greatly persuaded by...[my] four Rogers’, i.e. my theory that Rogers’ practice/theory passed through four stages, roughly according with his location: Rochester, Ohio, Chicago, Wisconsin; nor of Frankel and Sommerbeck’s designation of two Rogers, pre- and post- the ‘Wisconsin watershed’. I would invite readers to read my longer article *Carl Rogers’ fateful wrong move in the development of Rogerian relational therapy: retitling “relationship therapy” “non-directive therapy”* published in last autumn’s world journal, as well as Frankel and Somerbeck’s *Two Rogers*

*and congruence* in the book ‘Embracing Non-directivity’ (2005), in order to gauge for themselves the weight of the arguments. With regards to my own article, I should perhaps mention that several weighty figures within the approach have expressed agreement with my position.

- As a psychologist John provides us with a detailed analysis of the nature of an attitude in an attempt to justify why he follows Barbara Brodley in defining ‘non-directivity’ as an attitude. Aside from being puzzled over what the notion of the non-directive attitude adds to the notion of the attitude of *respect/upr*, we may note that for her part Brodley—along with Jerrold Bozarth—considers Nat Raskin’s (1947) formulation of the ‘non-directive attitude’ to be *the* authoritative definition. To re-iterate in more detail points I made in my *Four Rogers’* article, here’s what I had to say in my longer article about Brodley’s and Bozarth’s reliance on Raskin’s depiction as definitive:

‘Barbara Brodley postulated that “client-centered nondirectivity refers to an *attitude* – the nondirective attitude (Raskin, 1947) – *not* to specific behavior” (Brodley, 1999, p. 79). For not only is it true that “he [Rogers] remained committed to the nondirective attitude,” but “it is in the bones of his theory and practice” (p. 82).

Jerold Bozarth posited that “the non-directive attitude was adeptly defined by Raskin (Rogers, 1951) [i.e., Raskin, 1947],” on which basis “client-centered theory – is a non-directive theory” (Bozarth, 2000, p. 1)’.

So how does Raskin (along with Brodley and Bozarth and Pratt) define ‘the non-directive attitude? It is exemplified, declares Raskin, when

the counselor makes a maximum effort to get under the skin of the person with whom he is communicating, [when] he [*sic*]tries to get *within* and to live the attitudes expressed instead of observing them, to catch every nuance of their changing nature; in a word *to absorb himself completely in the attitudes of the other*. And in struggling to do this, there is *simply no room* for any other type of counselor activity or attitude; if he is attempting to live the attitudes of the other, he cannot be diagnosing them, he cannot be worrying about their relationship to him, the therapist, he cannot be thinking of making the process go faster. (Raskin in Levitt, 2005, p. 330-331, my italics).

And how does Rogers regard this definition? Actually, as nothing other than an inadequate definition of empathy. On page 29 of *Client-Centered Therapy* Rogers says ‘it’s a description that may be rather easily understood [*as*]...emotional identification’ rather than ‘empathic identification’. For as Rogers evidenced in his own life, there’s a crucial difference between empathically immersing oneself in the paranoid feelings of another and actually

joining in their paranoia; of sharing in another's feelings *as if* they were your own rather than actually having them yourself.

To invoke again a hackneyed example, it's the stance of having one foot in the river and another on the bank, not two-footed immersion. Such an analogy highlights in fact a fundamental flaw in the thinking of Raskin, Brodley, Bozarth, and Pratt, which is that while the mind-set of the empathic therapist involves immersion in the internal frame of reference of the client's world, to some degree it also involves immersion in the therapist's own frame of reference. This bi-polar mental attitude has been elaborated upon by Peter Schmid (2005). Schmid helps explicate that which non-directivists find it hard to get their head round: how the person-centred therapist can be genuinely present as a person in the practice of person-centred therapy; how they can be openly transparent and authentic in their interactions; how their practice can accord with the mature Rogers of Wisconsin and La Jolla, my Rogers IV.

- There is much I can agree with in what John Pratt has to say about technique and diagnosis, but I would regard subscribing to the extreme Brodleyan position as a rigid, adversarial rootedness in the unanalyzed past, a stance that converts the notion of non-directivity into a noose that chokes off fruitful development of Rogers' person-centred approach. After all, aside from divisive infighting and a holier-than-thou restriction of practice to the technique of reflection, what has zealous advocacy of Brodleyan non-directivity got to show for itself?

A key challenge for Rogers' person-centred approach today is how to engage in a meaningful and influential way with the world of CBT, IAPT, *Recovery*, the medical model, other 'person-centred approaches', etc. To do so, part of what is needed is a sound theory. For, as Kurt Lewin said, 'Nothing is so practical as a sound theory', and as a theoretical concept non-directivity is clearly unsound; it has yet to be defined with the required precision. In consequence, it can't be part of a sound theory.

There is though, I gather, to be a forthcoming edition of the world journal devoted to the topic of non-directivity. Maybe it will contain the desired lucid definition.

I'm not holding my breath.

### References

- Bozarth, J. (2000) Non-directiveness in client-centered therapy: a vexed concept. Paper presented at the Eastern Psychological Association, Baltimore, Md.
- Brodley, B. (1999) About the nondirective attitude. *Person-centred practice*. 7(2), 79-82.
- Ellingham, I. H. (2010) The holey tale of the jumper. *PCQ*, November, 2010
- Ellingham, I. H. (2011) Carl Rogers' fateful wrong move in the development of Rogerian relational therapy: Re-titling 'relationship therapy' 'non-directive therapy'. *Journal of the World Association for Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counselling*. 10(3): 181-197.
- Ellingham, I. H. (2011) Non-directivity in the historical context of the four Rogers. *PCQ*, November, 2011.
- Frankel, M. & Sommerbeck, L. (2005) Two Rogers and congruence. In B. Levitt (Ed.), *Embracing non-directivity*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.

- Pratt, J. (2012) Non-directivity—the central thread. *PCQ*, February, 2012.
- Raskin, N. J. (2005) The nondirective attitude. In B. Levitt (Ed.), *Embracing non-directivity*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books. (Unpublished original work 1947).
- Rogers, C. R. (1951) *Client-centered therapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Schmid, P. (2005) Authenticity and alienation. In S. Joseph & R. Worsley (Eds) *Person-Centred Psychopathology*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.