

The Non-Directive Attitude: What Person-Centred Therapy is Not About

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‘When one brings together the various aspects of the facilitative conditions—empathy, warmth, respect, concern, valuing and prizing, openness, honesty, genuineness, transparency, intimacy, self-disclosure, confrontation—it becomes apparent that they constitute love in the highest sense or *agape* to use the Greek term. A loving relationship is the therapy for all disorders of the human spirit and of disturbed interpersonal relationships’.

C. H. ‘Pat’ Patterson, *Relationship Counseling and Psychotherapy* (1974, pp. 89-90)

Mirroring Rogers

My stance regarding *nondirectivity* and *the nondirective attitude* mirrors that of Carl Rogers who (a) in his theorising found no place for the term ‘non-directive’ once he had formulated the therapist ‘core conditions’ of empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard; and (b) only ever used the term ‘the nondirective attitude’ once in all his writings and that was when he referred to the article of that title by Nat Raskin (Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy*, 1951, p. 29).

Confusion

Regarding the term generating confusion, in *Counseling and Psychotherapy* (1942, p. 104), Carl Rogers had spoken approvingly of Jessie Taft’s ‘nondirective’ counselling practice when she had given a young girl the freedom to lean ‘farther and farther out of the window’. A satirical anecdote had arisen ridiculing the ‘non-directive’ therapist who remains in her or his seat, verbally reflecting back to the client their expressed feelings, even as the client jumps out of the window to their death.

As Howard Kirschenbaum relates, years later Rogers had told an interviewer: ‘I *know* the story. My answer, for once and all time, is that I would not have let him jump out of the window’ (Kirschenbaum, *The Life and Work of Carl Rogers*, 2007, p. 132).

This story helps highlight how much confusion has over the years come to be attached to the term ‘non-directive’, not a happy state of affairs when non-directivity has been taken to be a core concept of person-centred theory. For core concepts need to be as accurately and precisely defined as possible.

Clearly it would have been highly directive for the therapist to have intervened to prevent the client jumping out the window, so how can one justify it as a non-directive act?:

(a) Limit non-directive behaviours to the therapist acting psychotherapeutically and say this was an emergency situation outside the context of therapy when the therapist is simply acting as a member of the general public?

(b) Identify this as one of those situations where the therapist’s behaviour is governed by the non-directive attitude even though their behaviour is directive. In other words, the direct opposite of

that situation where the therapist non-directively gives the client freedom to jump out the window not in terms of holding a caring attitude towards the wellbeing of the client, but through possessing the non-directive attitude of being sadistically thrilled at the prospect of the client plunging to their death.

In other words, holding an attitude that is non-directive can be either positive or negative. The epithet of ‘non-directive’ is in itself a neutral descriptor. Arguing for its exclusive positive meaning creates confusion.

Raskin’s Brainchild

The notion of ‘the non-directive attitude’ is the brainchild of Nat Raskin nurtured to maturity by the formidable Barbara Brodley and her close associates.

As Raskin originally relates, ‘The nondirective attitude’ is on display when ‘counselor participation becomes an active experiencing with the client of the feeling to which he [sic] gives expression’; when, that is, ‘the counselor makes a maximum effort to get under the skin of the person with whom he is communicating, he 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’ (Raskin, 1947/2005, p. 330; Rogers, 1951, 29).

‘And’, expounds Raskin. ‘in struggling to do this, there is simply *no room for any other type of counselor activity or attitude* (my emphasis)’ (pp. 330-331).

Thus, as Barbara Brodley some 52 years later faithfully espoused, ‘client-centered non-directivity refers to an *attitude* (Raskin, 1947)—the non-directive *attitude*—*not* to specific behavior’ (Levitt, 1999/2005, *Embracing Non-Directivity*, p. 1)).

Rogers’ Response to Raskin

Rogers took account of Raskin’s depiction of ‘the nondirective attitude’ and not only wrote critical comments on the copy of the article Raskin shared with him, but included a long quotation from Raskin’s article on page 29 of *Client-Centered Therapy*, the work that Rogers published a few years after viewing what Raskin had written.

In *Client-Centered Therapy* (1951) Rogers expressed general approval of Raskin’s notion of the *nondirective attitude*, but that approval comes across as luke-warm, given that (a) in all of his writings, Rogers’ only use of the term ‘the non-directive attitude’ occurs in *Client-Centered Therapy* in his quotation from Raskin, and (b) as a rider to his long quotation of Raskin in *Client-Centered Therapy*, Rogers points up how Raskin’s account of the *nondirective attitude* could well be a case of ‘emotional identification’ being confused with ‘empathic identification’ (Rogers, 1951, p. 29).

Raskin’s description, says Rogers, ‘may be rather easily misunderstood since the experiencing with the client, the living of his attitude, is not in terms of emotional identification, where the counselor is perceiving the hates and hopes and fears of the client through immersion in an empathic process, but without himself, as counselor, experiencing those hates and hopes and fears’ (p. 29). Rogers was sensitive to this issue, due to once having himself undergone the

catastrophic experiencing of emotional identification in place of empathic identification (see Kirschenbaum, 2007, p. 183).

Rogers did not comment on Raskin's supposition that aside from the 'activity' of deeply immersing themselves (empathically?) in the client's world, expressing the 'nondirective attitude' meant 'there is simply no room for any other type of counselor activity'.

Necessary and sufficient

Disdaining to ever promote Raskin's conception of the *non-directive attitude*, Rogers chose instead to formulate and espouse 'The [six] Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change' (Rogers, 1957), where the 'core conditions' of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence/genuineness provided a depiction of the therapist's attitude and behaviour. Accordingly, in the years that followed, Rogers himself, and others most closely aligned with him—such as my advisor C. H. Patterson—extolled the 'core conditions' as primary constituents in any exposition of client-centred, and so person-centred therapy—Raskin's notion of the '*nondirective attitude*' was not part of the client-centred-cum-person-centred narrative.

How is it then that the '*non-directive attitude*' has become classified as a core concept in today's person-centred therapy when such a stance is patently at odds with Rogers' position from the mid-1950s?—(see Sanders, 2003, 2012; Schmid, 2001; Stephen, 2025)?.

In my view, there are a number of reasons why the 'non-directive attitude' has acquired the status it has in today's person-centred therapy. I discuss two of these reasons below:

(i) Brodley and the Brodleyites

As Jerrold Bozarth attests, Barbara Temaner Brodley is the person who 'perhaps single-handedly, kept alive the central place of the construct of nondirectivity as the principle espousing the client as being her or his own best expert' (in Moon, Witty, Grant & Rice, *Practicing Client-Centered Therapy Therapy: Selected Writings of Barbara Temaner Brodley*, p. iii). For she it was, as 'a client-centered partitioner and a theorist', who 'educated, consulted and inspired significant numbers of nondirective therapists over the 50 years' (p. iii). And she too who 'advocated the 'Necessary and Sufficient Conditions' (Rogers, 1957) as nondirective attitudes' and thereby distinguished the 'Empathic Understanding Response Process' (Temaner, 1977/2011) as the predominant form of client-centered therapy' (p. iii).

Barbara Brodley's espousal of her 'nondirective client-centred therapy' is self-evidently based upon Nat Raskin's blueprint as set out in his article 'The Nondirective Attitude' (1947/2005 in Levitt *Embracing Non-Directivity*), a blueprint on which she (and her colleagues) sought (a) to interweave Rogers' formulation of the core-conditions, and (b) to specify in relation to non-directive client-centred therapy the impure nature of such developments as those created by Eugene Gendlin, Les Greenberg and colleagues, Garry Prouty, Margaret Warner, Dave Mearns and Mick Cooper, and indeed Rogers himself.

Thus, an initial challenge vis-a-vis validating the legitimacy of non-directive client-centred therapy was to explain why this therapy was legitimate client-centred therapy when Rogers had declined to validate it. In Brodley's words, 'The non-directive attitude was not *formalized* in

Rogers' theory' (Brodley 1999/2005, p. 2, In *Moon, et al*). Here the key question was, why he had opted to validate the therapist core conditions but not the non-directive attitude.

Brodley met this challenge in a bold fashion that killed two birds with one stone. She not only informed the person-centred world that Rogers' failing to formally validate the non-directive attitude was a *faut pas* on his part since 'it is implicit in his writings and his own therapy behavior' (p. 2) and therefore is one that needed to be remedied, but, she informed, too, that this formal validation would keep client-centred therapy free from contamination by various deviant developments of it.

As Brodley puts it, that is:

'The nondirective attitude needs to be explicitly incorporated into client-centered theory and practice. It is necessary to preserve a relatively pure and highly effective form of client-centered therapy'.... and so 'clarify a major difference between client-centered therapy and other related therapies' (Brodley, 1997/2011, *Moon*, p. 49; 1999/2005, *Levitt*, p. 3)

Of these other therapies, Brodley specifically mentions Eugene Gendlin's 'experiencing therapy' (now 'focusing oriented therapy'); Greenberg, Rice and Elliott, and Mearns and Cooper's 'Relational Depth'.

Whereas fellow non-directivist Jerrold Bozarth levels criticism at Garry Pouty's 'pre-therapy' (Meeting Eleanor); Brodley associate, Marjorie Witty, highlights 'meaningful differences' between 'non-directive client-centered therapy and process-directive therapies' associated with Eugene Gendlin, Leslie Greenberg, et. al., Germain Lietaer, and Margaret Warner (Witty, 2005, *Levitt*, pp. 228, 231, 243-244); and Brodleyites Marvin Frankel and Lisbeth Sommerbeck identify Rogers himself departing from non-directive practice, hypothesising the existence of 'two Rogers' (Frankel & Sommerbeck, 2005. *Levitt*, p. 40). Rogers, it seems, had departed from the original 'pure' form of client-centred therapy when he had told Gloria, 'You look to me like a pretty nice daughter'. This, of course, ran counter to the total immersion in the client's frame of reference of the true Raskian non-directivist as exemplified by Barbara Brodley when she said, 'I have no rationale for self-disclosures' (Brodley, 2006/2011, *Moon*, p. 17).

Stemming from Raskin's definition of the non-directive attitude, what was in accord with Brodley's rationale was 'the use of the 'reflection of feelings'', or as she termed it 'the empathic understanding response', 'the most power tool and most frequently used one in client-centered therapy' (Brodley, 2011, *Moon*, p. 45). Concordant, though, with Raskin's confession of having 'no room' for doing anything else and Brodley's repudiation of techniques associated with the 'impure' process-directed person-centred 'tribes', Brodley's non-directive client-centred therapist seems to have been authorised to do very little else than provide 'empathic understanding responses'.

As to the relation of non-directivity with the core conditions, in Brodley's view, 'the non-directive attitude is intrinsic to Rogers formulation of the therapeutic attitudes' (Rogers, 1957, 1959)' (Brodley, 1999/2005, *Levitt*, p. 1). However, while Brodley declares that 'empathy is an attitude' and 'unconditional positive regard is also an attitude', she doesn't view congruence as an attitude, insofar as congruence is defined by her as 'a state of integration within the therapist' (p. 4).

So even on Brodley's own portrayal it does seem puzzling how the 'nondirective' attitude could be intrinsic to congruence, while not only I, but also Barry Grant, one of her close associates, would deem empathy to be more an activity than an attitude. As Barry Grant, on his analysis, consequently posits, 'empathy is defined first as an activity, not an attitude' (Grant, 2005, *Levitt*, p. 249).

Such an interpretation would leave 'unconditional positive regard' as the sole therapeutic condition in which 'the nondirective attitude' is intrinsic, a conception that interestingly accords with the view that Barry Grant expresses elsewhere in the course of providing a definition of 'principled nondirectiveness' (Grant, 1990/2002, *Classics in the Person-Centered Approach*). There Grant highlights that the 'attitude of principled nondirectiveness' is represented by an 'unwavering expression of respect' (Grant, 1990/2002, pp. 375, 376).

Thus, given that 'respect' is one of those synonymous terms which has been employed to define 'unconditional positive regard'—Patterson, for instance, both identifies it as such and points up that with Carkhuff and Berenson view upr as a misnomer, Carkhuff chose to give his rating scale of Rogers' upr the name of 'respect' (Patterson, 1974, *Relationship Counseling and Psychotherapy*, p. 59)—what we come to realise is that with the non-directive attitude being essentially another label for upr, once Rogers had defined the construct of upr, the notion of the non-directive attitude had become insufficient and unnecessary—unless, that is, there is a need to justify exclusive use of the 'reflection of feelings/empathic understanding response' and vilify counselling techniques different from it.

Consequently, employing the term 'the non directive attitude' rather than upr, or respect, opens the way for critics to level the charge of the person-centred approach being close-minded or 'colonising' vis-a-vis its restrictive attitude to counselling techniques. For the term 'non-directive' always carries the connotation of referring to counselling technique..

The political pluralists

The decades long campaign by Barbara Brodley and her associates to keep the community of client- and then person-centred therapist 'relatively pure' in their theory and practice led to a significant negative reaction from individuals who felt their developments were not impure versions of Rogers' ideas, but constructive developments of them.

In the face of what Pete Sanders called the resulting 'challenging debate' between the non-directivists and those they had deemed 'impure', Pete developed the idea of the 'tribes' of the *person-centred* approach (Sanders, 2004). A political move, it was designed to provide a pluralistic system in which each 'tribe' respected the autonomy and integrity of all the other tribes, akin to a pluralistic society respectful of diverse religions. Thereby, the various 'tribes' were prevented from splitting off from one another thanks to sharing a common set of primary and secondary principles. Of particular interest with respect to the present discussion are the following primary principles, especially principle (iii):

- (i) The primacy of the actualising tendency (the growth principle).
- (ii) The necessary and active assertion of Rogers' 'Necessary and Sufficient Conditions', i.e. empathy, upr, and genuineness, etc.

(iii) ‘Primacy of the non-directive attitude *at least* at the level of content, but not necessarily at the level of process’ (Sanders, 2004, p. 155).

With reference to principle (iii), notice how Pete, for the sake of harmony between tribes, glosses over the 40 year claim of the non-directivists that process-oriented ‘tribes’ are not client-centred because they are directive in terms of process. Non-directivists and process-oriented ‘tribes’ mean radically different things by the term ‘non-directive’. But by saying they share a common belief in ‘the non-directive attitude’, this difference gets glossed over. It’s bit a like saying Angela Merkel and Vladimir Putin share a common belief in freedom when what that believe by the term ‘freedom’ is totally different.

However, by treating the notion of non-directivity as a necessary principle of being person-centred, the argument could be made that the non-directivists belonged to the person-centred nation. They could be prevented from separating from the other tribes and going their own way—although insofar as ADPCA is dominated by non-directivists, the fact that ADPCA has held its annual conference on dates which clash with dates of the world PCE conference suggests that Pete’s efforts to prevent such a separation haven’t been too successful.

Aside from Pete Sanders, another major person-centred figure who has striven to keep the non-directivists within the fold of the PCE world association is Peter Schmid. In an article featured in the book *Embracing Non-Directivity*, Peter provides an in-depth analysis and discussion of views expressed about non-directivity within the person-centred community over the years—views both for and against. Peter defines his view as pro-non-directivity.

But I would argue this conclusion has to be considered within the political context of his wanting to validate and find a place for the non-directivists within the person-centred nation. Thus, although Peter has much that is meaningful to say about the nature of ‘non-directiveness’ and ‘non-directivity’, my interpretation of what Peter is talking about is ‘*the* therapeutic attitude of unconditional positive regard’ of the person-centred therapist’, an attitude that aside from ‘non-directive’ might also be designated—and in some cases better—by the terms non-imposing, non-coercive, non-interfering, non-colonising, and respectful.

For, as Peter puts it, ‘Today non-directivity might not be an up-to-date term that unambiguously expresses what the matter is all about. The term itself states only what person-centred therapy is not about’ (Schmid, 2005, *Levitt*, p. 91). What’s more, ‘when taken simply as a rule or technique, non-directivity becomes perverted to the opposite of what it is meant to mean’ (p. 91).

Final Remark

In this final remark I point out how the notion of non-directivity fits with a mechanistic interpretation of psychotherapeutic change (see Ellingham, 2001). This issue was originally highlighted by Eugene Gendlin.

Gendlin highlighted that when, as Rogers did, the psychotherapeutic change process is thought of as a symbolisation process taking place in the client and the symbolisation process is compared to a light being shed on something previously in the dark, there, another viable comparison is with something moving from a place in a machine that is out of awareness to a place

in the machine that is in awareness, as when on the hour the cuckoo in a cuckoo clock moves from inside the clock to outside.

What we have therefore, indicated Gendlin, is the psychotherapeutic change process being represented in mechanistic terms not in terms of a growth process—the feeling which comes into awareness is no different from the unfelt feeling which was out of awareness: out of awareness, to use Gendlin's term, the feeling was already 'fully formed'.

For his part, Gendlin made much of the fact that on his interpretation the psychotherapeutic process was a growth process: that before a feeling became 'fully formed' in awareness it was not completely out of awareness, as it existed in awareness in nascent form as a 'bodily felt sense', and it was this nascent form that became 'fully formed' by virtue of the symbolisation process—that symbolisation process taking place, as Susanne Langer emphasises, when the pattern intrinsic to the symbol congruently matches the pattern intrinsic to the 'bodily felt sense'. It is a dialectical process, as Peter Schmid points up.

What is significant here, in relation to the notion of non-directivity, is how this notion fits with a mechanistic interpretation of psychotherapeutic change. The feeling of which one is unaware is already 'fully formed' and thus what psychotherapeutic change consists of is of 'not-interfering' with the unfelt feeling itself, but of removing any 'obstacles' to the feeling coming into awareness, i.e. in the case of the cuckoo clock, of not doing anything to the cuckoo when the cuckoo fails to come into awareness, but of making adjustments to the little doors that aren't working properly and so not letting the cuckoo come into awareness.

Thereby, as Rogers elaborates in *Counseling and Psychotherapy*, therapy becomes 'a matter of freeing him [the client] for normal growth and development, of removing obstacles so that he [or she] can again move forward' (Rogers, 1942, pp. 29). In such a situation, therapy becomes a matter of not getting in the way of an autonomous growth process, of being non-directive, and so of actively and congruently engaging in a process of empathic attunement or resonance. As Rogers was later to put it, therapy now becomes viewed as a matter of resonating with the client 'at all levels' (Rogers, 1980, *A Way of Being*, p. 9), and thereby growing the egg of awareness into the cuckoo of fuller consciousness.